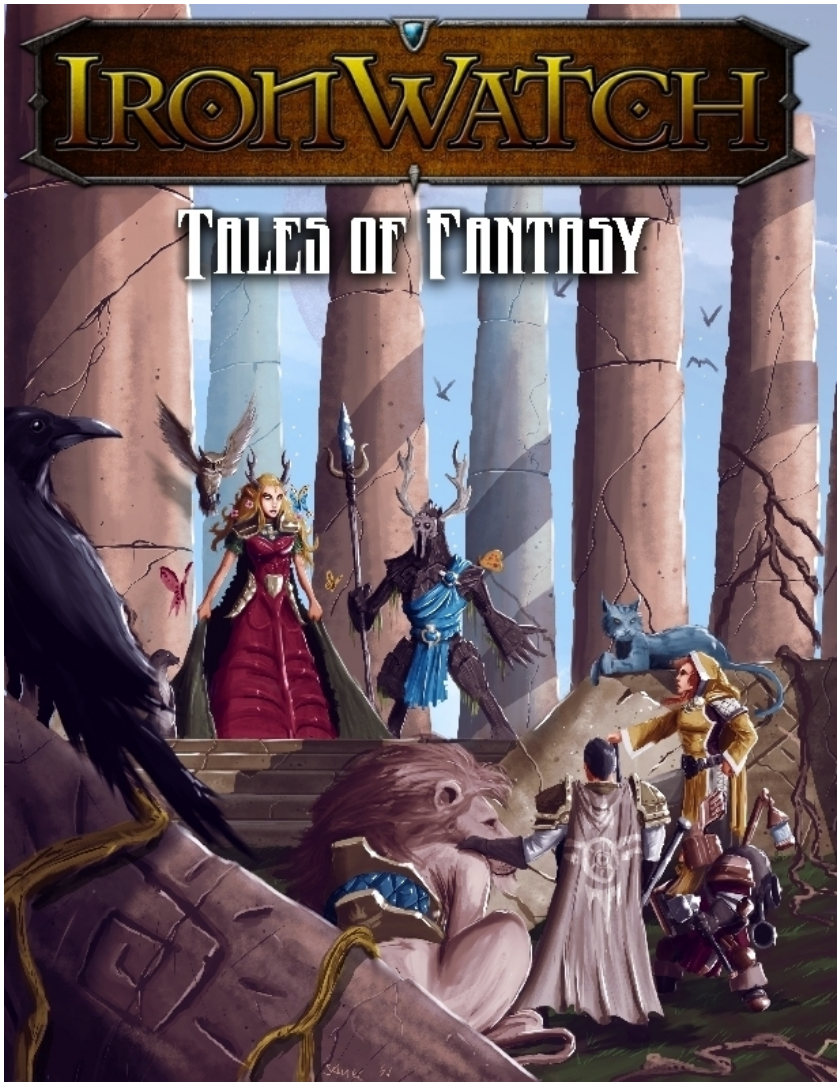
IronWatch
Tales of Fantasy

Ironwatch: Tales of Fantasy

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Introduction

Over the past half-decade, one of the key strengths of the Ironwatch magazine has been our fiction. From foul Abyssal Dwarves to noble Basileans, from enigmatic Elves to human thieves and vagabonds, the stories cross the whole of Mantica and provide a multifaceted view of the tales and adventures players have had and tales they've woven around the armies from Kings of War and Dungeon Saga. We're glad to finally be able to put these fantastic tales and legends into a single collected volume for you to enjoy.

In the months and years to come, we're looking forward to seeing tales from Mantic themselves as well as from our players, such as the narrative and individual struggles surrounding the summer campaign of Edge of the Abyss. This event has promised to change the face of Mantica significantly, and we're excited to see what new stories and battles our amazing array of writers come up with next; if you have such a story, we'd love to see it, so please send it to ironwatchmagazine@gmail.com.

Ironwatch wouldn't be where it is today without our writers, both past and present. Thank you for your contributions, for crafting narratives that kept our readers and editors alike coming back for more, and for helping to expand the world of Mantica for other fans to enjoy. You have been the backbone of the magazine, with readers reliably able to anticipate some adventure or epic in the next installment to capture the imagination.

Now, without further ado, please go and enjoy the tales within! Who knows: you might even find that a story sparks the imagination for a saga of your own, one that could be enshrined in a future issue of Ironwatch magazine…

Austin Peasley
Editor-in-Chief
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Argun's Luck

by Matt Gilbert

THE TWO DICE dropped from Argun's hand and rattle-bounced across the wooden table. One took an erratic deflection into the heavy tankard of grog that sat in front of the brown-skinned thug to his left before coming to a stop at the edge of the game board. The other skidded off onto the floor. The orc to his left, Jarl, picked his teeth with the tip of a wicked looking dirk.

"Six" he noted, his single good eye staring at the die remaining on the table. "But the other doesn't count"

The third player at the table contemplated this and then slowly studied his hand of painted wooden sticks. "Yeah" he ventured, and then "does that mean the boss 'as another go?"

"It means I 'ave to roll that one again you idiot" snarled Argun. "Just like all the other times it's 'appened"

Argun took a swipe at the orcling perched on his left shoulder, causing it to flinch away and then scamper on to the floor to retrieve the errant die. It chattered as it skipped across the floor and then held the carved bone cube up out of the shadows with both hands for the players to see.

"Six again. So near yet so far" Jarl said. "Looks like your luck ran out this time Argun".

The orcling scrambled clumsily up the thick table leg, hampered by the load it was carrying. As it reached the top Argun snatched it away.

"Give that 'ere Spittle you little runt. Right, boys watch 'n' learn. My luck never runs out".

The die was dwarfed by the hand of the Krudger and with his other he grabbed Spittle by the head and held him dangling over his own large mug of ale. "Just in case though" he said, grinning with yellowing teeth, "let's get this die pissed so it forgets not to screw

me around". He squeezed the helpless orcling until its mouth popped open. Then ramming the die into the orcling's mouth, he held it by one leg and dunked it in the beer before pulling it out again. "Right lads, watch this". He punched the back of Spittle's head with a wet thunk and the die popped out, landing with unerring accuracy in the middle of the board.

"Six". Jarl threw his own hand of sticks down in disgust while Meathead, the other orc at the table looked up and said "so as 'e won then?".

"Course I won" said Argun, dropping Spittle to the floor. The orcling quickly scurried across the flagstones into the corner of the room out of reach. "I always bloody win".

***

LIFE WAS GOOD for Argun. He'd always been one of the biggest orcs in a race of hulking brutes. His size gave him power too, both physically and psychologically. But he was good at what made an orc rise to the top; he knew how to fight and fight dirty. This and his wit had seen him rise to power quickly, the status of Krudger coming easily with many orcs willing to follow "Facesplitter" – a name he'd earned after altercations with a number of challengers to his authority. Piece-negotiations Argun called them. You talked. He left you in pieces.

Like most nomadic warbands, his boys had scoured the plains; raiding Dwarf mining camps and terrorizing human towns and villages. The horde had increased in size as smaller warbands were subsumed and soon larger settlements became viable and necessary targets. Argun's reputation for fortune preceded him and was only enhanced by engagements like those at Harvon's Pass and The Bickervale where they'd taken minimal casualties and routed larger and superior forces. At Yurdhaven Cross though, things had not gone so well.

The humans and elves had prepared well and the elven general managed to take Argun's left flank by surprise. The resulting collapse had scattered the Krudger's warband, with only a regiment's worth following Argun into the Forest of Galahir. They

had killed their pursuers but found themselves wandering aimlessly for many days. Argun violently suppressed any mention of ill luck, as was a Krudger's right, and drove the band deeper into the trees. Four days into the trek, his fortune changed.

One evening, they'd accidentally stumbled into a clearing occupied by a ragtag band of human adventurers and chancers. Having set a poor watch and gotten themselves intoxicated on cheap wine, the humans were quickly overpowered and put to the sword – the fresh meat a welcome feast for the voracious greenskins. Argun kept one of the humans alive long enough to… entice the man to divulge the group's purpose.

The man-thing whimpered and cried and soiled himself more than once but eventually explained that the group were treasure hunters, following a map recently discovered in a library in Yolkston - two hundred leagues to the West. They were looking for an ancient hideout said to be in the forest nearby. Between the tears and screams Argun deduced that other troupes were also scouring the area for the hideout; the lure of what might lie within too great to resist the perils of the forest. The man had a copy of the map and knew they were close. On the morrow they were certain they would find it.

Sensing an opportunity for some sport for his demoralized band of grunts, Argun had them search the bodies. The map found, he had snapped the neck of the last survivor and tossed the body aside.

At daybreak, Argun roused the mob, kicking most onto wakefulness to angry snarls and grunts. With the map as a guide they discovered the humans were closer than they thought to their goal.

And now here they were.

What Argun first saw as a minor setback had become a new opportunity. Sure they'd lost a handful of volunteers to the various traps and surprises the place had to offer but over the last year they'd made a good living. The hunting in the area was good so food was plentiful and in the first few months at least four different groups of adventures had found the caves only to realize they were not unoccupied. The treasure haul from these unfortunates made

the experience all the more fun.

Argun began to stoke things up, spreading rumors of the cave's treasures while at the same time terrorizing the villages which lay within a week's radius of their new lair. A steady flow of opportunists and mercenaries hired to clean them out kept the boys in shape and the band's hoard of plunder increasing.

They themselves had found none of the rumored treasure of course. All that lay at the center of the tunnels was a large cavernous hollow, its vaulted ceiling hidden in deep shadow. From the narrow opening into the chamber, they could see huge tree roots like living stalactites dropping out of the gloom, tapering to thin, delicate fronds that eventually brushed a pool in the floor.

The orcs avoided the place; it felt unnatural and repellent to them. The pool glowed with a cold, insipid light which cast eerie shadows. If anyone wandered too close, they suddenly found themselves back at the cavern entrance again with no recollection of how they got there. The voices would not stop whispering in their head for hours after.

Nearly a week ago, one of the goblins, Rikks, had thought it amusing to hurl night-soil into the pool as a dare. Getting as close as he comfortably could he succeeded in hitting the target with some if not all his ammunition. Since then, the goblins had spent any time not out scouting entertaining themselves by playing "crap-splash".

"Boss?"

Argun leaned back against the cold wall. The place was remarkably dry but no matter how many torches, wood or bodies the orcs burned, the chill was always there.

"What?"

Argun had a space to himself at the end of wide tunnel. Most of the lads slept in two large communal chambers on the other side of the complex. The original occupants had seemingly taken a small, natural cave system and carved out additional rooms and tunnels to

extend the warren-like layout to twice its original size. No trace or hint of who they might have been had been found.

Meathead stepped through the opening into the room where Argun and Jarl were dicing again. Jarl was a sly one and useful for his brains, but Argun only trusted him when he could see him and so liked to keep his lieutenant around when he wasn't otherwise occupied. Meathead was his Sergeant from the former Greatax regiment and while a little slow, he had a ferocious battle temper and could swing a Greatax like no-one Argun had seen before.

"We got visitors boss. Tinker just came back in. The other scouts is dead 'e says.". Meathead began picking at the huge pale green scar running down his left arm; a gift from a cavalryman's blade back at The Bickervale. "'e don't look too good Boss".

Tinker, Gobban and Rikks were the only three goblins who had survived the events at Yurdhaven Cross and Argun had employed them as scouts and sentries in the woods around the complex. Meathead picked up the small bundle of cloth and limbs he'd been dragging behind him and dumped it on the floor in from of Jarl.

Argun grabbed Tinker by the scruff of the neck and lifted him up level with his eyes. "He don't look great I'll grant you that" he observed casually, "But then 'e always was an ugly sod. What 'appened Tinker?"

The goblin moaned and tried to lift its head but was struggling to find the energy to speak. Argun tightened his grip and the sentry squealed. "E….e…… elves. Many-lots". The effort of speaking too much, Tinker passed out and Argun, irritated, growled and tossed him aside.

"Seems we've got company lads. Good. We've all been getting a bit lazy of late and Jarl and I were just discussing moving on out of 'ere. We all need some bigger scraps and I want to be out on the plains again. If that upstart Chok still fancies 'imself a better Krudger than me I think I'd like to show him the error of 'is ways. We need to build the band back up again." He stood and flexed his massive arms, trophy rings clattering across the blue tattoos and battle scars.

“Get Jurk to prepare the traps” he commanded, “and tell Brekkun to get ‘is ‘airy arse out there and lure ‘em in.”

“Brekkun don’t ‘ave an ‘airy arse boss” said Meathead “not since ‘e sat on that knight’s oil lamp”.

Argun chuckled, a deep crackling belly rumble. He turned to Jarl. “Want first pickings?”

It was at Harvon’s Pass where Argun had met Jarl. The leathery skinned orc from the deserts of the South had been taken captive by slavers of the Twilight Kin during a raid. The slavers were returning home and converging with others of their kind in a large host heading back to the Abyss. Jarl knew his fate at the hand of the elves was going to be despairing, painful and ultimately fatal.

One evening, the Kin had picked Jarl out for special attention. They had taken his eye that night. Already tortured and tormented during the journey, many captives had not survived by the time the Kin were assembling in Harvon’s Pass before moving on. As the warhorns blew in alarm that fateful evening, Jarl knew it would be his chance to escape.

Strangling his guards with the chains that they thought bound him, Jarl managed to then free and rouse the other surviving orc prisoners and began to run riot in the elven encampment. Assaulted by Argun’s force on one side and undermined by a revolt from within their own camp, the Kin were overrun and slaughtered. Jarl impressed Argun and quickly rose to prominence in the warband.

Whenever there were elves to fight, Jarl took the lead, his loathing for the race ignited in a frenzy of violence that was fed by hate.

“Yeah” he snarled, picking up his Ax from where it rested against the wall. “Show me where they are”.

***

NO ONE HAD come back, but Argun had heard bellows and the sound of clashes echoing through the caves. He sighed. What was

taking so long? In the corner of the room, the orclings in the cage on the wall had been getting more and more restless, their sniveling and whining getting on Argun's nerves. Spittle cowered on the floor under the room's single burning torch, the flickering light barely reaching the opposite wall. His cleaver in his belt and his Ax in one hand, Argun took the torch from the sconce, knocking a fine cloud of old soot over the trembling orcling. "With me Spittle. If you want something doing properly, you 'ave to do it yourself". He kicked the creature causing it to squeak in alarm and hurriedly clamber up the orc's body to perch on his shoulder. Argun pocketed his dice. "Let's go play with the elves".

Argun knew something was wrong; he could sense it. There was something in the air. Something unsettling. It was like the feeling in the pool room had seeped out and was spreading through the tunnels; the air felt thick and oily.

The echoes of battle were coming in short, sporadic bursts. A shout. A clash of metal. A scream. As he turned a corner he stumbled across two orc bodies. Jurk had been impaled on a spear that stuck from the ground: one of the traps he'd been tasked with setting. The dead weight of his corpse had slowly dropped all the way to the floor down the wooden shaft.

Kruk had had his throat slit and had also taken a stab wound in the left shoulder blade. He'd taken one of the enemy with him though Argun discovered as he kicked the body over. Underneath the orc, the lifeless form of a young elf lay crushed and bleeding. Its smooth pale green skin was in stark contrast to the crimson liquid that leaked from the many cuts all over the body and one arm was almost severed at the elbow. The feline-like eyes stared coldly at the wall, cloudy yellow and bloodshot.

The Fey! Argun had heard about these elves but never seen one in person. Bound to the natural world and forest life, these faeries were a rare sight indeed. Spittle was routing through the pockets in Kruk's leather jerkin but was studiously avoiding the elven body. Well, they seemed to die like any other elf and they were going to pay for intruding in Argun's lair. He kicked the body savagely and growled. Ax and cleaver in hand, he stalked down the corridor towards the sound of battle.

***

MEATHEAD WAS FIGHTING for his life. The tricksy little bastards were running rings round him and his men, three of whom were already down. The elves had lost a couple of their number too but had the advantage of ranged arrow fire. The warband's Sniffs were off with Jarl so Meathead could only respond by getting in close but the damn things kept dodging and striking, dodging and striking – darting in and out the sputtering torchlight.

Suddenly, to his left, Var-Terkan roared in triumph as he caught an elf bowman in his grip as it tried to duck past him, slashing with a small curved blade. Var-Terkan lifted the elf straight off the floor and smashed its head against the tunnel wall with a sickening crunch. The body went limp, but before it dropped to the floor Var-Terkan buried his Ax deep into the chest, once, twice, three times. Meathead bellowed his approval and swung his own massive two-handed Greatax straight through the body of a spearman from shoulder to rib, spraying gore across the passageway.

Undeterred, two more elves ran in to take their comrade's place, one of them getting under his guard and ramming a spear into the meat of his thigh. Meathead howled in pain and fury as he watched Var-Terkan slain from the rear and two more orcs were felled behind him with arrows, the elves then fading away again into the gloom. All alone now, something in Meathead snapped.

A redness seemed to spread across his vision; a fury building to a tumultuous climax. Ripping the spear shaft from his leg, he swung his Greatax in huge scything arcs and charged headlong into the dark.

Jarl was breathing hard. He'd taken a nasty stab wound to the ribs which was impeding his movement. Hatred drove him on though: hatred of the elven race and what they had done to him. It mattered not that it was Twilight Kin who had captured him. Tortured him. Ripped out his eye. All elves were the same to Jarl, and murdering them gave some small measure of revenge. No number of dead elves would ever be enough for him though; his lust for blood consumed him totally. He was hunting now, stalking his prey - two

surviving Fey which were eluding him.

He paused briefly by a body slumped up against the wall. Brekken. Some darkly humorous voice in the back of Jarl's head told him this was the first time Brekken had been able to sit down in ages, but Jarl dismissed the thought with a snarl and pressed on.

Ahead, the corridor opened out slightly and had been hastily blocked with a collection of rubble and broken furniture; a makeshift barricade for the lone orc Sniff who stood behind it and had started trading arrow fire with the two Fey Jarl now saw swiftly moving towards him. He covered the ground quickly - two arrows barely missing him to impact against the wall, one chipping stone across the floor. He dived behind the barricade, rolling and coming to his feet in a fighting stance just before Fey leapt the obstacle and fell upon him.

Argun's weapons were slick with blood. He'd taken some minor wounds but in return had dispatched five Fey and one of the beings they called a Mage-Queen. She had fought savagely and with magic too – blasts of incandescent lightning smashing into the orcs around Argun and conjuring powerful gales which swept down the corridor, knocking them to their feet.

Many bodies, Spittle's included, lay scorched and battered before Argun managed to take the elf-bitch down, hurling his cleaver with all his might and burying it in her cerulean face. As he strode over to yank the heavy blade free he caught a glimpse of something at the periphery of his vision.

The silhouette of a large Fey, bracketed by the pale, unworldly glow which seemingly emanated from the being itself, paused briefly at the entrance to the tunnel leading to the pool chamber and then vanished in a blur. Argun retrieved his chopper and moved to follow the being down the passageway.

***

JARL'S HATRED KNEW no bounds. He'd killed the first elf quickly, his knife now pinning the faery against the tunnel wall, through the throat and deep into the rock. The second elf was now weaving in

and out of his reach and had twice breached his defense to score glancing hits while the Sniff was still rapidly loosening arrows from the barricade into the dark passage.

All Jarl's swings and blows were a fraction too late; the lithe elven fighter seemed to have an almost preternatural ability to anticipate his actions. He was becoming increasingly frustrated and as a consequence he almost made a fatal error. The elf came in from the left and Jarl swung his Ax down in a vicious chopping sweep but his mistimed slice caused him to overbalance and the elf nimbly rolled right, under his weapon and then came to its feet, weapon chopping down and severing Jarl's arm just above the wrist.

Argun heard the scream of rage as he rounded the corner and took stock of the picture in front of him. Down the corridor was a hastily prepared defensive wall from which a Sniff was desperately firing arrows at the iridescent figure speeding down the tunnel with an effortless grace and speed that couldn't be natural.

Clambering up the pile of rubble and hauling a comatose body behind him in one hand, Jarl appeared oblivious to the approaching danger. Now at the top, he hoisted the elf into the air and brought it down across his knee with a sickening crack. Contemptuously, he tossed the body aside and roared - a primeval venting of emotion that thundered down the passageway with an almost physical force.

The shimmering Fey leapt, drawing its bow as it did so with an almost impossible agility. It contacted the wall and instantly flipped across the passage, acrobatically gaining height off the tunnel sides. Mid-air and halfway across the space, it launched a crystal tipped arrow shaft with unerring accuracy. The missile flew true - a cold and impassionate answer to the cacophony of rage emanating from the orc atop the blockade.

Jarl took notice too late, his brain registering the situation a split second before the arrow took his remaining eye. As he crumpled backwards to the floor the elf cleared the barricade, landing and taking the head off the Sniff with a single fluid motion and sweep of its razor sharp blade. Argun felt uneasy. Not fear – he'd never felt afraid, but he had a distinct feeling his fortunes were perhaps not running along their normal tack. This finishes now he thought and

ran down the passage after the demon elf thing.

***

THE AIR FIZZED with the taste of magic. Argun approached the figure cautiously as it stood facing into the pool room. Tendrils of pale wispy light radiated from the elf-thing and drifted down into the pool, and motes of dust sparkled and flared as they floated into the rays. As Argun neared the Fey the light pulsed brighter and then suddenly dimmed. The temperature in the corridor dropped to a bone chilling low. Wall torches sputtered and died and a crackling frost spread across the stone walls. Argun's breath burned his throat and his breath smoked around him as the elf turned to face him.

Tall and slim with the stereotypical physiology of the race, the Fey had feline eyes and a catlike grace to match. Where the younger Fey had a pale green complexion, the older more powerful Fey were typically a brown-grey, their skin almost bark-like. This one however was surely something born from the Abyss. Its skin was a deep crimson and seemed to cast the space around it in a bloody red luminance. The face of a demon. It spoke, but Argun felt the sound in his head rather than hearing it through his ears.

"Your kind have defiled this place orc" the sound was soft, caring, and at the same time full of threat and menace "and we have come to cleanse the infection. The seedlings of the world-tree are sacred and you must pay for your ignorance."

The fiend moved with a speed that seemed impossible. Argun had excellent night vision but struggled to pick up the elf's movement as it began a relentless assault, a whirlwind of flashing blades and stabbing strikes. Sparks flew as Argun fought a retreating defense, his world becoming a pattern of block, parry, block, parry.

Twice the elf got through his guard, once to slash down his left arm and again somehow appearing behind him to cut across his spine, barely missing his neck. The wounds in themselves were superficial, deflected and weakened by Argun's mail coat but many more would start to take their toll: death by a thousand cuts. Argun's own blows when he made them were skillfully dodged by the elf, the evasion becoming a seamless part of its flowing battle-dance.

Argun's cleaver was knocked spinning from his hand and he tripped and fell heavily over the leg of an orc carcass. As he landed, his hip jarred painfully and his pair of dice scattered out across the floor. The elf-demon slowed briefly, approaching the body Argun had stumbled over. During the brief respite, Argun realized where they were. The elf was about to step onto a trap trigger buried under the floor.

Somehow it had not gone off previously despite all the fighting but a spark of hope now flared in Argun's heart as time appeared to slow and the elf's foot stepped lightly onto the floor.

Nothing happened. Curse Jurk and his tardiness. The elf vaulted forwards to finish him off and he heard the voice in his head again, pure malevolence this time. "And now you die orc".

Argun scrambled back deflecting the blows raining down on him with his Ax as he backed out into the junction. Anger now boiled within him. He was not going to die like this, not killed by this Abyssal-cursed faery. Catching the elven blade on his Ax he opened up the elf's body and surged forwards, slamming his huge mailed fist into the side of its head.

The Fey staggered backwards and crashed into the wall. Before Argun could follow up, it pulled its bow free and drew an arrow in a blur of supernatural movement. It aimed, drew and then spun to the right as Meathead came crashing round the corner out the gloom, his Greatax already moving in a huge sweeping arc. Orc and elf struck at the same time. The massive Ax bit through the torso of the Fey, carving the demon-thing in two before crashing into the cave wall.

The elven arrow passed clean through Meathead's throat. The light went from both combatants' eyes as the momentum of Meathead's charge toppled his corpse into the bisected elf and they both slumped to the floor. Blood began running in an ever spreading pool across the stone.

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ARGUN BLINKED AND shook his head clear. The faint glow from the Fey had quickly receded but a small point of light, intense like a miniature sun, rose from the body to the air before speeding down the tunnel towards the pool room, briefly illuminating the passage walls in a cool blue light before vanishing into the distance. Some degree of warmth returned to the air.

Argun used his Ax as a crutch to push himself to his feet. He walked over to the torso of the elf and prodded it gingerly with the toe of his boot. Satisfied it really was dead, he walked back up the passage and picked up his cleaver, slipping it back into his belt. Looking around he spied his dice in a dark corner against the far wall.

This was a sign he thought. Perhaps from Garkan himself that he'd grown complacent here in the caves. It was time to move out; regrow his warband and his legend before both time and younger, ambitious Krudgers caught up with him. He was still lucky – of that much he was certain or he'd now be dead along with everyone else.

Stooping down he reached to retrieve the dice on the floor. As his weight pressed on his front foot he heard a click, and then felt the whoosh of air above his head as a huge blade span out from the wall and buried itself in the stone opposite. Jurk's trap had finally sprung.

He glanced at the dice. Double six. Scooping them up, he dropped them back into his pocket. Yes he thought as he made his way outside, still lucky.

The Siege of Berhoe

by Matt I.

My name is Isaakios Chlorus, Regent of the Diasta Estate, a grandee of the Kingdom of Serdia, and until a few days ago I felt I knew war. I don't like war, and certainly am no soldier myself, nor felt any association with those who claim to follow that bloodthirsty profession, but I felt I knew war all the same. In my twenty years as one of the most trusted advisers to Prince Niketas IV I had certainly seen enough of it. I saw my role as mostly finding a means to avoid bloodshed and mediating an amicable resolution to the petty disputes that plagued the Lords of this land. But I knew well enough that sometimes war was unavoidable, and sometimes even the preferable outcome, particularly in my Lord's disputes with some of the alien races of the region. Yet for all of the battlefields and campaigns I have seen in my many years, none were like this. This is something different, something more starkly brutal than any of those experiences. This is pure, unadulterated, slaughter.

The city of Berhoe is located in the far east of the Ardovikian Plain, in the center of a wide valley that leads into the foothills of the Dragonteeth Mountains. The city owes its prominence to the steady stream of trade that plies the river Marist, which flows north into the distant Frozen Sea. The city has been in the hands of the Niketas family for over four generations now and has known only prosperity during this time, rising from merely one of many bustling townships in the region to the prime city ruling over all of them. It's security is ensured by the broad expanse of flat, rolling meadow that extends in every direction, perfect for both farming and the maneuvers of the Prince's household cavalry, and its imposing circuit of fortifications. Boasting solid stone walls, twenty feet high and three feet wide, carved from solid granite blocks transported from quarries in the Dragonteeth Mountains, the city was a daunting proposition for any invader seeking to despoil the valley and the wealth of the Ardovikian Plain beyond. Or at least, so it's inhabitants had thought.

Four days previously the first alarm had been raised of an enormous war host entering the valley from the east. Report told of large numbers of demonic Dwarf kin, bearing twisted panoply of war and

leading an enormous train of siege engines. A quickly assembled council decided, not unanimously it must be said, that the size of the approaching host was too large for the Prince's forces to meet head on. Instead the decision was made to send messengers to the neighboring Princes with an appeal for succor, and in the meantime prepare for a siege. Supplies of provisions were brought within the city, while those left over were put to fire. The approaches to the walls were carefully cleared, granting clean lines of sight to the defenders, and every able bodied man was immediately pressed into service. With reinforcements expected to arrive within the week, these were all the precautions made by a wise and experienced leader to best prepare the city for the short siege that was anticipated. They proved to be hopelessly futile.

The demonic Dwarf horde encamped some miles distant from the city, none could say how far exactly for they could not be decried even from the wall's highest tower. Our only contact with the besieging host was a lone Herald who approached the city early in the morning following the horde's arrival. He approached the walls and halted just beyond bow range. Little could be made of the figure other than that he was a diminutive, bulky warrior, encased in ornate, highly burnished, armor that gleamed dully in the morning light. In a guttural yet clear voice he proclaimed to speak as the Herald of King Karath Hzak, a figure of whom we had heard dire report of the worst excesses of brutality and barbarity. In terms that brooked no compromise he demanded the immediate surrender of the city into the hands of his King. He departed with the jeers of the defenders following him. A mere hour after the Herald's departure the commencement of hostilities was signaled by the combined roar of countless artillery pieces. Over two minutes later, the first shells began to fall.

With an earsplitting whine, the missiles seemed to fall directly out of the sky, negating the impressive height of the fortifications, and they fell with an unerring accuracy, only ever a few dozen yards inside the walls circuit. The damage they wrought was seemingly out of all proportion to their size. Tight, compact, demolitions sent razor sharp shrapnel flying in all directions. What's more the shell's ejected an alarming volume of a liquid fire that thwarted all conventional attempts to douse it. The bombardment soon inflicted a horrific toll on the defender's positioned on the wall, who were entirely exposed to the devastation erupting behind them. Orders

were given to evacuate the walls for the duration of the bombardment, but in many locations these orders came too late. In the face of the intense bombardment, thoughts of sallying forth to quiet the cannon were quickly abandoned and efforts instead were directed to saving as many lives as possible and stop the further spread of the flames.

The assault continued throughout the day till, near evening, all that was left within a one hundred yard corridor within the walls was a blazing ruin. The guns abruptly ceased firing, their cacophonous booming that had echoed throughout the valley suddenly evaporating. The return of the Herald was almost missed through the ashen-laden haze, but his proclamation was heard by all. It insisted upon the same terms as before; immediate and unconditional surrender to his King. None were now left upon the walls to jeer. A hastily convened council assembled to consider the demand. A few dared question the possibility of a compromise and the further exploration of terms, but these lone voices of dissent were quickly shouted down and the Herald was once again turned away. I am sure that a few more present than those who spoke up would also have welcomed a discussion of terms at this stage. I know I certainly felt that way.

That was the last sighting of the Herald, and that was nearly two days ago now. The shelling re-commenced shortly after his departure and has continued unabated ever since. The bombardment was relentlessly methodical in its brutal efficiency and accuracy. Starting further in than before it commenced to obliterate another circuit of the town. Not a single shell fell short nor long. All fell within a short distance of each other, and they left another devastated circuit of the city nearly one hundred yards wide. The surviving inhabitants were now herded within an oppressively confined area within the immediate vicinity of the cities citadel that stood proudly unscathed, surrounded on all sides by a sea of fire. The heat and noise drove the Duke's horses mad and many were cut free to avoid their crippling themselves in their mania. Some tolerated being led into the relative security of the cellars beneath the citadel, but many others broke free, and in their madness were consumed within the flames.

We do not know if the Herald will ever return, or whether we are fated to be consumed within the slowly approaching walls of flame.

None now would refuse the terms offered. Surely no fate could be worse than the hell which we are now enduring. I have seen men who have fought bravely for the Prince for a decade reduced to gibbering wrecks, utterly defeated by the effort of trying to contain the flames and the burden of nervous tension brought on by the unceasing bombardment. Many now wish we had sallied forth when we had the chance, even if it would only have met with certain defeat. Death on the battlefield must surely be better than to die here, herded in like cattle. Even I can see that. Surely now no other fate remains for us. Even the closest reinforcements could not hope to arrive for another four days hence, and it would not be till a further week had passed till a concerted campaign could be launched. I give us barely 48 hours till the inevitable end comes.

I can see how some would consider this fate unfair. Brave men being annihilated by an enemy we cannot even see, let alone confront. Yet this is war just as I have always known war. Victory is measured in dead bodies and broken minds, and this is as sure a way as any to defeat a foe that I have encountered in my many years. We who had once been so proud of our arms and our walls are now reduced to a cowering rabble, begging for the chance to surrender to our unseen, pitiless, foes. There is naught to do now but wait till the end arrives. I hope it comes soon.

Yours Faithfully
Isaakios Chlorus

The Owl and the Blade

by John Hoyland

The Sundering
I

“The gates are closed to you and yours.”

Such simple words. Such a weight of meaning.

Such terrifying understatement.

The *gates* were so much more than that little word said. They were vast, and carried the weight of a mountain above their lofty arch. They were stone, and carved from the mountain itself. They were closed, and could not be opened from the outside, whether by herald’s plea or cannon’s demand.

Deor Ule stared up at them, seeing as if for the first time the runes of welcome and of warding that were carved there.

Determination clamped Deor’s jaw shut and melancholy ringed his eyes around with grey.

“I will make such a home,” he whispered to himself, “That for a hundred times a hundred generations my people will be proud of their Hold and of their name.”

“Husband.” There was a softness to the voice; a kindness and also a longing. “Set your back to gates and your eyes upon the road. Your people would have you lead them.”

Deor turned to his wife and offered her a wan smile and a shallow nod. He raised his hood, hiding his head from the sight of the gates. He was a stranger to the Hold now.

“Fare thee well, Deor the Owl,” called the Warden of the Gates – he who had pronounced them closed a moment earlier. “May the Shining Ones ever guide you on the paths you take.”

“May they indeed,” muttered Deor Ule. “May they indeed.”

II

Let it be recorded and faithfully set down that the People of the Owl (those of the Clan of the Lord Deor Ule), whose number was reckoned at three thousand and seventeen souls, have, in good faith and by binding oath sworn and attested before the altars, departed and sundered themselves hence from this Hold. Never more shall their deeds be recorded in these annals as being the deeds of our people. Never more shall reverence be given unto their ancestors, nor praises sung of their deeds.

They are sundered from us and are numbered among the unHolded, until such time as heralds shall come forth from them bearing tidings of Settling. At such a time, and if presented with petition, the Lords of the Clans of this Hold will determine whether the People of the Owl should be considered Holded and thus a true people, worthy of accord and of trade once more.

Thus it is and thus it shall be, from this day hence until the world does diminish unto darkness.

III

The first day of journeying was damp and grey. Drizzle filled the air, soaking cloaks and beards so that they clung to flesh, and lending a despondent note to the songs of lament that the People of the Owl sang.

The second day of journeying saw the sun break out and the north road dry hard so that by the third day of journeying the column of dwarfs hiked in a cloud of dust.

It was the dust, drying throats and eyes, which set the People of the Owl to grumbling. That and the fact that three days of travel had seen the mountains recede to little more than purple-grey smudges at the horizon. Mountains which, until mere days ago, had been their ancestral home.

“Now the bitterness of our unHolding begins to bite,” the people

said. “We are homeless and abroad in the wilderness. Where will we now call home and Hold?”

These things and others the elders brought to Deor, encamped in his tent at the center of a canvas city. The nightly setting of this city was already giving rise to streets and alleys, districts and quarters; here the merchants, there the artisans. Here the wealthy, there the poor.

“The people grumble so soon?” asked Deor. “We will face much harder times in the days to come.”

“There are those of us here who are warriors,” said Breydd, commander of Deor’s cavalry and, berserker or not, a voice whose counsel Deor often sought. “And for us the journey is yet easy. But your people are all here and those who know little of the military life, or of life above ground – let alone of the long roads in the wilderness – those for whom life has been *easy,* are finding the reality does not match the romance in their heads.” The inclination of both head and voice made the target of his comments clear.

“You wish to level accusations, or merely insinuate?” snapped fat Areg, his cheeks coloring.

“I will spell it out as clearly as you wish, merchant,” growled Breydd. “You are rich, and your riches have made you soft. Do not think I am ignorant to whose voice leads the complaining.”

“Please,” Deor’s voice was soft, but rich with the authority of a Clan Lord. He sat hunched forward at his state table, elbows propping him up, fingers laced. He chewed a thumb nail. “Do not. Either of you. Areg; the road will get much harder yet. You must learn to live without the comforts you knew. This Sundering will be something of a leveler to us all. Breydd; you are a rare traveler among my people and few are as hardy. Do not measure others against your own hardiness lest you come quickly to despise your people.

“I will need you both in the days ahead. Both of you possess skills that the other lacks, as do all here gathered.” Deor looked up and around the table. “You are here – all of you – for your skills and your wisdoms. The one thing I ask of you – of all my people – is

patience. Our road will be very dark at times, for we travel the wilderness. There will be great losses along the way, such hardships that it will seem the People of the Owl must surely be brought low.

“But we will endure. We are an ancient Clan with a proud history – the proudest! We will do more than simply endure; we will overcome.”

“Tell us where we are going,” urged Areg. “Let your people know!”

“Ah, that I cannot do,” whispered Deor, “For I do not know. But I will tell you this; I follow the light of Ariadd, as I ever have. She will be my guide.”

“You will follow a star into the wilds?” asked Areg.

“*A* star?” said Deor. “No. *My* star.”

“It is enough,” said Breydd.

“I am sworn to you,” said Areg. “As are we all. It is enough for me also.”

IV

Here begins the Chronicle of the People of the Owl.

Let it be recorded and faithfully set down that the People of the Owl are unHolded, a wandering people with neither home nor Hold.

We are thus because our Lord, Deor the Owl, made bad bargain with the Children of Man, who are a baseless folk and know little of honor. The bargain our Lord struck brought shame upon his head and upon his beard and thus brought shame upon his people. Thus it was decreed by the Lords of our former Hold (the name of which shall not be besmirched by being given letter herein) that we – the People of the Owl – should set forth upon the road and that the gates should be closed behind us.

Let it be recorded that this Chronicle did not begin until one week of our unHolding had passed.

Let it be recorded also that it was on this, the seventh day since our unHolding, that the first of our Rangers returned nigh to our camp and knelt at our Lord's feet.

V

"The world keeps turning? Sun and Moon continue to chase one another across the dome of the sky?"

"They do my Lord."

"Mantica cares little that we are unHolded."

"Indeed not, my Lord," Eolos the Ranger was never comfortable in the company of the great. He was never comfortable in company of any sort. The wilds were all he needed. To kneel at his Lord's feet, to feel the eyes of one so highborn upon him, filled him with something close to dread. He felt exposed and on show and Eolos the Ranger did not like to be on show.

"Tell me of the world."

Eolos the Ranger shifted his weight from one knee to the other. "I have seen little of the world, my Lord," he said.

Deor Ule smiled down from his dais. It was strange, Eolos thought, that the great should carry the trappings of their greatness with them when they journeyed. The stone dais – and the hardwood throne sat upon it – seemed at odds with the canvas they were under.

But this, Eolos supposed, was no ordinary journeying. The People of the Owl were unHolded. Deor Ule had no home in which to leave dais or throne.

"Tell me of those parts of the world that you have seen," said Deor. "Tell me of the lands my people march across."

"They are claimed by a King of Men who is named Gratticus. His line have been Kings here for five generations. He is very proud of

this. Among the Kingdoms of Men this counts as well-established royal lineage."

Deor smiled, though without humor. "I am well acquainted with the ways of Men and with their kings and kingdoms."

"Of course, my Lord." There was an edge to Eolos' words that made Breydd shift at his Lord's side. It was an edge that said, *you do not know the ways of Man as well as you think; we are unHolded for that very reason.*

Deor held up a hand to forestall word or action from Breydd. "I know of this Gratticus, though only by reputation. What I have heard speaks of a harmful pride. I fear he will not let us cross his kingdom cheaply."

"More I have heard, Lord, even seen with these eyes, and would urgently share. The lands of this Gratticus are near overrun with orcs. He has three cities in his realm; two of them are destroyed. Only his capital is left. His people mutter that, even if the orc should be defeated, the Kingdom of Gratticus is ended."

Deor considered Eolos' tidings. "What number the orc?" he asked at length.

"The people of this land say ten thousand."

"And when fear and rumor are removed, what then number the orc?"

"I would say no more than two thousand, from the evidence I have seen."

"Two thousand. Thrice the number of warriors I have to command." Deor lost himself to thought for some moments. Then he nodded. "Can you get word to Gratticus King?" Eolos nodded. "Then, Eolos the Ranger, I charge you thus; take word to Gratticus King that I, Deor Ule, Clan Lord of the People of the Owl, follower of the star Ariadd, unHolded but staunch in battle, shall rid his lands of the orc and as payment I ask merely safe passage across his lands."

“It shall be so.” Eolos rose from his knees, bowed deep and turned from his Lord’s tent.

Deor looked to Breydd. “Battle and the orc call us,” he said.

A slow smile spread across Breydd’s face. “Then let us answer them,” he growled happily.

***

Blood
I

War’s touch was not far from the People of the Owl. Deor Ule sent out scouts north, east and west and, within a day and a half, the first of these scouts began bringing reports of farms burned, of villages razed and of bodies blackened by fire and twisted by torture.

They brought reports too of skirmishes. The men of Gratticus King, liveried in red and yellow, were putting up a brave fight, but they were few and they were disheartened. They hit and ran, never facing the orc on equal terms and never fighting fair. To give Gratticus his due, his troops of archers were well-drilled and proficient for the task but, as more reports filtered back to Deor, and as Deor had the chance to question some of the human soldiers personally, it swiftly became evident that most of the fighting troops that Gratticus could muster were either slain in the field or called to his capital, there to await his ending.

“Is his capital besieged?” Deor asked of both his own scouts and the men he was able to question.

“Not yet,” he was told. “But it cannot be long.”

Eolos the Ranger did not return from Gratticus King and Deor Ule knew he could not wait. He called together his council of war.

“My Rangers tell me that the main strength of the orc is all before us,” he told his council, “So my people are safe for the time being. The orc, as yet, is unaware of our presence and is too bent on

striving for Gratticus King's capital that it gives little thought to scouting its rear, or worrying about a strong rearguard.

"We will fall upon the orc with main force and, though he outnumbers us three times, victory will be ours. Thus will be recorded the first battle honor in the Chronicle of the People of the Owl."

II

The sun had not yet gathered her strength; the shadows were long and the dew still glittered on the grass when Deor Ule's scouts brought word that the orc was arrayed before them.

"Are they aware of us?" Deor asked, dropping his coat of mail over his head and wriggling his arms into the sleeves.

"No my Lord." The scout's clothes were damp from slithering through long grass and gorse.

"And they have set no rearguard?"

"None, my Lord. Their attention is all on the capital city, whose walls are but a few mile's march hence."

"Then we will strike their rear and destroy them utterly." Deor beckoned for his herald to come close. "My compliments to Breydd, he is to send his squadrons east and west two miles, keeping out of sight and sound of the enemy, then turn and fall upon their flanks with all the clamor of war that he can muster!" The herald bowed and left. "And once our cavalry have commenced their attack," Deor said, as much to himself as to the still-kneeling scout, "We will crest the hill and fall upon the orc."

III

Breydd let the berserk fury take him. It swept over him with the power of a storm gale. His mouth opened to roar, though he was barely conscious of it, and as the noise left his throat so his fellows joined in, throwing a great, ululating war-cry to the heavens. Heavy bladed spears were held high, blue and white pennons tearing at

the wind. The brocks that were the dwarfs' mounts, vicious beast whose temperaments at least matched those of the warriors they bore, snapped and growled as they ran, jaws champing and clacking, flanks heaving.

Too late the orcs spotted the danger. Ragged battalions on either flank turned to face the danger but orcs have never been a disciplined fighting force. The maneuver was ill worked and uncoordinated and Breydd's cavalry knew their business well. Spears were leveled to full tilt as the distance closed to nothing, necks were hunched into shoulders, jaws were set in grim determination.

And battle was joined.

The crunch of impact made the earth shudder, though the cavalry numbered but a few dozen on either flank. Orcs shrieked as they reeled. Flesh was split, blood was spilt.

The brock riders barely slowed after the charge. Orcs were thrown to the ground and trampled hideously. Bones crunched and organs burst. Orcs shrieked their pain.

The dwarfs cast aside their spears and set about themselves with axes, hammers, maces and morningstars. Their mounts joined in, cracking bones between vice-like jaws and swiping chunks of flesh with yellowed claws.

But slowly the bloodlust of the orcs brought them back into the fight and dwarfs as well as orcs began to fall. Even in the throes of berserk fury, Breydd sensed the moment and had the withdrawal sounded, hoping that similar signal was given at the other end of the battle line.

And then, even as Breydd and his riders began working themselves free of the press, Deor Ule sounded the charge at the enemy's rear.

IV

For Deor the Owl, combat brought freedom. No time now to worry on the fate of his people. No time to play politician or Clan father.

His axe swept in clean, well-rehearsed arcs, cleaving where it struck, countering where there was danger.

This was the life of the Warrior Lord; to lead from the front, to stand shoulder-tight with battle brothers, to feel the stinking breath of the foe on your face, to taste the iron tang of his blood in your nostrils.

Deor Ule laughed as he slew. “I am Deor Ule!” he cried. “I am unHolded! Come! Feel my axe!”

The orc battle-line had recovered from the shock to its flanks. Had turned to the threat from its rear.

And now threw itself at its foe with all the might it could muster.

***

Blade
I

The sun hit its zenith and Areg pulled himself to his feet. Careful to affect as nonchalant a demeanor as he could, he sauntered over to where a knot of dwarfs – all male and all either too old or too young to be fighting – were hanging on the every word of one of Deor’s runners.

“The battle is fully joined,” the runner spoke through panting breath. “Breydd’s cavalry tore up the orcs’ flanks and now the Owl himself stands at battle’s center, hewing the foe. The orc cannot long hold – we will carry the day for certain!”

The dwarfs cheered and clapped at this, slapping each other’s’ backs and chuckling to each other. Areg took a couple of hearty slaps on the back and offered well-meaning smiles of encouragement in return. Then, as the dwarfs clamored for more detail from the runner, he quietly slipped away.

He had an appointment to keep, and woe betide him if he was late…

II

The woodland was still and quiet, a tranquil pool away from the huddled mass of landless dwarfs and the noise and action of their lord's battle with the orcs. It was pleasantly dappled with midday sun; refreshingly cool in the heat of the early summer.

Areg was sweating freely anyway.

"You border on tardiness." Areg jumped at the voice, cursing himself even as he did so. He had known the voice would come from nowhere, had known it would take him by surprise, had known he would jump with fright at it. He had known all this and so he had strained every nerve to its highest height, determined to show his rendezvous that he was no coward.

The moment he let his frustration get the better of him, the moment he dropped his guard for the slightest heartbeat, the moment he turned even a fraction of his concentration from taking in every tiny sight and sound, that was the moment the voice spoke.

It was as soft and melodious as ever. As singsong spell-binding as ever. As heart-meltingly beautiful and as gut-wrenchingly terrifying as ever.

"I cannot simply walk away at a moment's notice," he growled, hoping he could keep the fear from his voice. "It would… arouse suspicion. I am forced to wait for distractions before extricating myself from the throng."

"You could have walked away from that over-excited mass of mewling pups and scratchy near-deads any time you liked. You chose to hang around. Were you seeking reflected glory? Hoping someone would draw attention to your closeness to your kingdomless king? The vaunted counselor, whose words guide the king's actions? A doubly important voice now your people are unHolded? You are pathetic. I wonder sometimes if we should let you rule in the Owl's stead."

"Show yourself," hissed Areg, trying to hold on to at least a shred of the initiative. "I tire of talking to a disembodied voice."

A still silence.

Then a prick of pain in the lower back.

Areg tensed, but refused to be cowed by fear. How could any being, elf or otherwise, move so damned *quietly?* It went against nature's law. "You were watching me in the camp of my people?"

"It is rare that I am not watching you, counselor."

"I would see your face."

"My face? No. I will not grant you that. But you may look upon my form. Turn around."

Areg did so, dread stealing into his heart.

Why should that be? Why should he dread to look upon an elf? He had traded with elves many times. They held no dread for him.

"A dread sight, is it not?"

He reads my thought? He reads my thought!

The elf was wrapped entirely in purple. A deep hood hid his face entirely and – beyond the fact that he – *he? She?* – was as slender as was to be expected, and as tall – the cloak of purple gave no hint to his form. Of the blade that had a moment ago been poised at Areg's back, there was no sign.

"How does the Owl?" asked the faceless purple cloak.

Areg swallowed. "The battle goes well for him. His stock among our people will rise after this."

"Then you must use all your wiles to ensure that this rise is followed by a fall, counselor. Have you learned where the Owl leads you yet?"

"He will not say, save that he follows his star."

“How quaint. ‘His’ star is the one that your people name *Ariadd,* is it not?”

“How did you..?” Areg swallowed again and swiped sweat from his brow.

“Do not be so conceited as to think that I watch only you, counselor.” The elf paused, as if considering for a moment. “Ariadd shines in the north. Very well. I will take this to my master. You and I will speak again one week from now, unless I send sign that it is to be sooner.”

“How will I know? What your sign is, I mean?”

“You will know.” The elf turned to go.

“I want further assurance that I will wear the crown after Deor’s death!” Areg blurted.

Even as he spoke the words he knew they were a terrible mistake. The elf was across the clearing quicker than moonlight. Areg felt cold steel prick at his throat.

“The fact that you still draw breath after our conversations is more than assurance enough,” the elf whispered, though to Areg it seemed a raging shriek.

He nodded.

The blade was withdrawn and disappeared inside the cloak. The elf backed off a pace.

“Tell me your name at least, or some moniker by which I might know you.”

The elf – perfectly still cloak and hood once more – appeared to think upon this. After a time, he gave the slightest shift of his head.

“Amongst my people I am known simply as The Blade,” he said.

And was gone.

***

Aftermath
I

“What is the butcher’s bill?” The leather of Deor’s glove creaked as he clenched and unclenched his fist, testing the stitches holding closed the gash on the back of his forearm. He winced slightly at the itch the movement provoked.

“Why are you wearing your gloves?” Breydd asked.

“I go to meet envoys from Gratticus King,” replied Deor. “And I go arrayed for war. Now, the butcher’s bill?”

“Thirty-seven dead,” said Breydd. “A little more than a hundred wounded, of whom forty or so will not fight again and something like a dozen will probably die of their wounds. All in all, a tale of success, I would say.”

Deor’s eyes were downcast. “I doubt the spirits of those who died unHolded would consider it a success.”

Breydd grunted. “Nevertheless, to defeat an orc horde three time greater than our numbers and lose so few? Any chronicler would record that as a great victory.”

“I do not dispute it was a victory, perhaps even a great one,” sighed Deor. “But victory and success are not always the same thing.”

Breydd said nothing. He cared little for the philosopher’s bent that seemed to come over the Owl from time to time. He understood that melancholy often followed battle, but there was more of the introspective about Deor than Breydd could fathom. Breydd saw the world with the simplicity of the warrior – and the berserk at that. It was well, he knew, that he was not a lord.

“Do you need me for anything?” he asked.

Deor lifted his gaze to meet Breydd's. "No," he said. "Not immediately. But when Gratticus King's envoys come, then I will summon you. Areg also."

Breydd bowed and turned to go.

"Oh, and Breydd –"

The berserker turned back to his lord.

The edge of a smile played around Deor's features. "– When I summon you, bring your angriest glower with you. I want Gratticus King to know that the People of the Owl are not to be trifled with."

Breydd grinned. It was like watching a predator bare its teeth.

II

Deadr wept. She wept for her husband, whose corpse was stiff, grey and cold already and she wept for her cousin, who had lost a son to the orc. She wept because neither she nor her cousin could bury their beloved kin in the ancestral chambers beneath their mountain Hold. She wept because neither she nor her cousin would stand at the threshold of the Chamber of Remembrance and listen to the deeds of their kin read aloud as each new year was hallowed. Because the People of the Owl had neither chamber in which to inter their dead nor Chamber of Remembrance in which to recall the deeds of their dead.

Because the People of the Owl were unHolded.

Because their Lord, Deor Ule, was a fool.

It was a treasonous thought, that one. A thought that, given voice, would see her before the Council of Elders. A treasonous thought for which she could be branded, flogged or even executed.

But not while it remained a thought. While it was but a thought she was free to hold it, to nurse it, to let it fester.

But Deadr wanted to shout it at the stars.

She became aware of a presence behind her and turned enough to catch a glimpse of who it was who intruded on her grief.

It was the fat merchant, Areg. One of Deor Ule's counsellors and therefore as fool a dwarf as the Owl himself.

"Don't say anything," she warned. "I want no platitudes. No talk of victory." She turned back to her husband's corpse. "There is no victory here."

"Indeed not," agreed Areg, which caused Deadr to frown. "Do not presume," Areg continued, "That all the Owl's counsellors advised attacking the orc. Battle should not be the only weapon in a Clan Lord's armory."

Deadr's frown deepened. Areg's words – or at least the speaking so freely of them to one who did not sit on the Owl's council – bordered on treason.

Was it a trick? Was her loyalty to the Clan being tested?

"Speak your thoughts freely," said Areg. His voice was barely above a whisper.

"My thoughts are my own," Deadr told him.

"Very well," said Areg. "But know that you can safely – confidentially – air them to me, should you feel the need. Whatever your thoughts may be."

Deadr wanted to speak. To give voice to her anger. To her treason.

She held her tongue.

"So be it," said Areg after a time. "I will leave you with your grief." Deadr heard the shuffle of clothes as the merchant turned to go.

"It *is* grief," she was surprised to hear her own voice, blurting out of the quiet. She was surprised too to find herself turning to Areg. "Grief holds me now. But my thoughts are not only of grief.

“They are also grievous. Treasonous. But I would rather keep them as my own, for the time being.”

Areg’s face was flat, emotionless. “Of course,” he said. “Give it time. Two, three days. If your thoughts are still grievous – *treasonous*, even – and you find that you wish to give them voice… well… my offer of confidentiality will still stand.”

Deadr turned briefly back to her husband’s corpse, on the verge of asking his advice.

When she turned back to Areg, the merchant was walking away.

***

Gratticus King
I

“Why should Gratticus King treat with his enemies?”

Gratticus King’s herald stood tall, all perfectly pressed red and yellow tabard and nose thrust high in the air; the better to look down at the dwarf Clan Lord. Gratticus King himself stood back from the meet, a smile of pure condescension dressing his features. Before him stood his household guard, heavy pole-arms held at an angle that spoke of threat without being levelled at the dwarfs. The air those men gave off said that any slight move toward their liege lord would result in blood being spilled.

It wasn’t an auspicious start to a parley.

“His enemies are dead by our hand,” replied Deor, eyes looking past the herald and fixing on Gratticus King.

“You are abroad in his lands, under arms, and without his consent. If you can show him any treaty that says otherwise then Gratticus King might consider sitting at table with you. If not, then you are his enemy and the only aim of this parley is to settle upon the speed with which you will surrender arms and march from his kingdom.”

By Deor's side, Breydd spluttered at the herald's words, but an utterance from his Lord bade him hold his tongue.

"I have come here to parley," said the Owl. "And I do so from a position of strength." He continued to stare at Gratticus King. "Your armies in the field are crushed by the orc and what strength you have left resides in your capital. I do not believe that strength is enough to stand before my host."

The herald spluttered at that. "How dare –"

"– Hold your tongue, herald!" snapped Deor. He breathed a sigh. "I did not come here to offer ultimatums, but aid," he said at length. "Gratticus King; your lands are safe once more from the orc. I sent word to you that all I required in return was safe passage across your lands. My messenger did not return to me. Do you know of his whereabouts? His name is Eolos."

Gratticus King's eyes flinched, just a fraction.

"Gratticus King does not know of whom you speak," said the herald.

"Oh, but he does," replied Deor, eyes not letting go of Gratticus King. "Did you harm him, Gratticus King?"

Confusion worried at the herald's face and he turned to his king. "Great King?" he asked.

Gratticus King snapped to life. "Do not speak to me, worm!" he shrieked, his voice high and trilling. "Do not speak!"

"Where is my messenger!?" roared Deor suddenly, and now he advanced on Gratticus King. Breydd moved with him, an axe in each hand and a feral grin splitting his beard. Gratticus King's guard levelled their polearms, but not one of them looked keen to blood their blades, not faced with a glowering dwarf Lord unwinding his anger and a moon-mad berserk who grinned at the prospect of blood being let, be it his enemies' or his own.

"My lords please!" cried Areg, throwing himself into the middle of

the boil of it. “This is a parley! A talking, not a fighting! Let the blood already spilled on this ground be all the blood it has to see.”

Deor stopped still and let out a long breath. The anger around him seemed to diminish. Breydd halted too, but the pent up, fit-to-burst aggression of him did not dissipate.

“My counsellor is correct,” said Deor. “I did not come here to trade blows, merely to ensure safe passage through the lands of Gratticus King for my people. I had thought that a prince of men would know to offer thanks for the aid he has been given, but I see I was misguided in my thoughts. I should not be surprised by this; I have had… unfortunate… dealings with the Children of Man in the past.

“Therefore, I will simply offer you the blessings of the day and, permission or otherwise, travel on my way, my people around me. If Gratticus King wishes to offer battle then he is, of course, more than welcome to meet me in the field.

“He can expect the same quarter as was offered to the orc.”

II

“You certainly know how to endear yourself to the Children of Man, don’t you?” Breydd spoke with a wolf-smile on his lips. It was the smile of a wolf-lord congratulating a fellow pack-leader for a kill.

Doer smiled back, though without humour. He inclined his head to Areg. “Thank you, Areg, for stepping in when you did. A swift, wise – yes, and brave – action.”

Areg coloured at the praise. “Do not dismiss Gratticus King,” he warned. “He is no martial in the field, but he is, I think, spiteful and will not take lightly the slighting you offered him.”

“He doesn’t have the might to meet us in battle,” sneered Breydd. “His armies are shattered.”

“No,” said Areg, “But there are other ways to topple a ruler besides meeting him in battle.”

III

Gratticus King railed and spat. He hissed and shrieked. He called down curses on the heads of all dwarf kind. He threw things; chalices, plates, knives. One of his household guard nearly lost an eye.

But all his rage was impotent. The cursed dwarf lord was right. Gratticus King had nothing like the strength of arms to meet him on the field. It seemed he had no choice but to let the rabble of dwarfs wander free across his lands.

"No," he hissed to himself. "No! I am still king in this land. I will not suffer this insult! Herald!" The man crept from the shadows, shoulders slumped, eyes defeated. "You will carry word to the White Ones. I have a dwarf I wish dead."

The herald could not bring himself to meet his master's eye. "I fear there may not be sufficient in the coffers –"

"– Then you will take them whatever payment they wish! We have women. Children. Fresh meat for their depravities. I care not! The dwarf will die.

"And find the body of the messenger of whom he spoke. Eolos. Send it back to the dwarf. If it's too heavy for a man to carry, cut it into manageable parts."

The herald nodded, bowed and fled his master's presence. He felt a flutter of pity for this Deor the Owl as he fled.

Because Gratticus King sought the services of the White Ones.

And no-one survived when the White Ones blade-danced.

***

Blade Dance

I

The air was hard and chill. A weak sun sat on the shoulder of the

eastern hills and mist clung to the ground. Nothing moved.

And then a shape, silhouetted momentarily against the sun. The briefest of moments – a struck pose, lissom and elegant – and then it was gone. It dropped, seemingly absorbed into the mist.

Another. To the right of the first, similarly lithe.

Another.

Another.

Six, all told. The poses had been deliberate. A reveal. Like a court magician's moment of triumph.

Prasutac saw them all and, through the blear of tired eyes, felt fear at seeing them. The struck poses were predatory and aggressive, the movements feline.

And they were coming this way.

They were a good way off yet, but definitely coming this way.

Shivering – and not just with cold – Prasutac pulled himself to his feet. He cupped his hands and blew warm air into them, then shook them to try to get the blood moving. Then he cupped them again, tighter this time, preparing to blow an owl-call warning to his fellow sentries.

There was a suddenly flurry of movement right in front of him. Prasutac had the vaguest impression of something tall, endlessly graceful and hideously beautiful. And then it was gone.

It was only after the shape had vanished that Prasutac felt the merest tickle across his throat. It was an itch, nothing more. But even as Prasutac raised his hand to scratch at it, the itch roared into sudden pain, hot and vicious. Prasutac felt his legs give out from under him and his head go suddenly light.

And then the early morning sun lit the sky bright red; a strong crimson sheet from horizon to horizon. That was bad, Prasutac

knew; it heralded poor weather. *Red sky at morn…*

No. It wasn't the sky that was red. Not at all.

II

"All of them?"

"All of them. Throats sliced wide open. Not one of them had a weapon drawn and whoever the attackers were, they left only the slightest footprints. It's almost like they flew in and landed for the merest heartbeat."

Deor studied the face of his commander. He could see the anger simmering just below the surface of Breydd's features, but was there, also, the merest hint of fear? Certainly there was something of grudging respect for the skill of whoever had slain the sentries.

"You have the scouts out?" asked Deor.

"Your best rangers are scouring the land for sign of… of whoever did this," said Breydd, "But I have had no word yet."

"Do you think Gratticus King has an army nearby?" asked Areg. He was cradling a cup of warm, honeyed wine, hoping it would ward off the morning chill. And the fear.

"Of course he doesn't!" snapped Breydd. "An army we would have seen! No, not an army. But I would stake my brock that Gratticus King doesn't have warriors good enough to sneak up on my sentries like whoever – or whatever – did this."

"You would stake your lover on it? My, Breydd, that's quite a thing for you to do…"

It was Deor who snapped, before Breydd to could rise to Areg's baiting. "Areg! You will retract that and apologise to Breydd! I have warned you before! I will not have bickering and baiting among my council. Your speech will befit one whose station is that of counsellor to a Clan Lord, or you will face sanction. Is that clear?"

Areg stared at his Clan Lord, shock edging his features. “Yes, my Lord,” he said at length. “And my apologies, my Lord Breydd. My words were both beneath me and demeaning to you.”

Breydd couldn’t help but smile his triumph back at Areg. “Apology accepted,” he said, offering a short bow to the merchant.

“Good,” said Deor. “Now, accepting, as Breydd says, that there is no army out there, we have to ask who or what did this and what they aim to do.”

“To sow fear in our ranks?” asked Breydd.

“It’s working,” said Areg.

“Undoubtedly to sow fear,” agreed Deor. “But to what end?”

“If it was me,” said Breydd, reasoning it out, “I would do it to slow a column down: We will move cautiously today and, as news of the slaying spreads, fear will grow among many of the clan. We are in unknown lands and do not know where we travel. Folk are unnerved enough as it is. The slower we move, the easier we are to pick off.”

“Or ambush?” quivered Areg.

“Indeed,” agreed Deor, “But, as Breydd says, there is no force – certainly not of Gratticus King’s – in these lands to ambush us.”

“Could there be another force of orcs out there?” asked Areg. “One that we don’t know about.”

Breydd shook his head. “Never been known for stealth, orcs,” he said. “And the skill of these assassins… I can only think one thing.

“Elves.”

Areg felt fear flutter strong in his breast. Not at the thought of an elf army, but at the thought that his Lord might discover – or already know? – his link with the Blade. Might know of his treachery. For all his politician’s wiles, he couldn’t help but feel that guilt was

written all across his features.

“An elf army could hide itself from us, couldn’t it?” he asked.

Breydd harrumphed, then grudgingly admitted that such a thing was possible. “Unlikely though,” he said.

“So, elves or otherwise,” said Areg, “what do they want?”

Breydd answered Areg’s question by turning to Deor. “You,” he said simply.

“You think so?” asked the Clan Lord.

“I can see the merit in first slowing a column down and then cutting off its head,” said Breydd. “Slow *and* leaderless, a column like this would become very easy pickings.

Areg’s heart was hammering now. He had no doubt that Breydd had the right of it, but no idea *why*. The Blade had mentioned nothing to him, given no inkling of such a thing being part of any plan; indeed, it seemed to fly in the very face of Areg’s understanding of how things were to pan out.

Deor cut across his thoughts. “We move as quickly as we can,” he said. “Certainly we don’t allow the column to slow. Double the guard and have every warrior ensure his axe-hand is itching for action.

“And if anyone wishes to come at me – or my Clan – then let them come!”

III

The Blade’s eyes snapped open. He lay utterly motionless, even the beat of his heart slowed to near-stillness.

Something…

Something moving. Stealthy. Expertly so. Nearly good enough that the Blade had missed its presence.

But in the assassin's business, *nearly* isn't nearly good enough.

Noiselessly – so noiselessly that, had anyone witnessed it they would have sworn it was impossible to move so completely noiselessly – the Blade swept himself to his feet. He closed his eyes and allowed his head to roll back, nostrils flaring as he breathed deep of the air around him. For a moment he was still. Then his eyes flashed open, his head snapped forward and he *moved*. To call the movement running would have been to do it an injustice. It was gliding.

There were hunters nearby, hunters of a calibre with which the Blade was familiar; they were heading for the refugee train of Deor Ule and they were heading there with murder on their minds. They had not been commissioned by the Blade's masters, he knew. No others had.

And if their commission did not come from the Blade's masters, that made them the Blade's enemies.

IV

Breydd's assessment had been right; word of the death of the scouts had spread among the people of the Owl and fear had followed. With the fear had come a slowing in the column's pace; warriors, merchants, smiths, mothers, butchers, leatherworkers, scribes, children, all cast nervous glances around themselves, afraid of the unseen enemy who had so casually slain the sentries in the night.

Stories began to circulate. Stories of wizards and abyssals, of black-hearted elves and the dark kin of the dwarfs who dwelled in the north. Eyes were cast northward as the tales were told; northward to where the sky was dark with sulphurous clouds and the underside of those clouds shone orange with flame.

Northward to the reaches of the great Abyss.

Deor ordered his counsellors to quash the rumours wherever they came across them and this they faithfully sought to do. Even Areg played his part, although he was careful to sow seeds of doubt

among his words, so that those he spoke with were left feeling that they were not being told everything and that those in power knew what it was that stalked them but would not share their knowledge.

The assassins struck at dusk, just as the column was in the mess of setting camp. They simply appeared in the middle of the mass of dwarfs, unseen by anyone until they were within striking distance of the dwarf Lord.

They carried long, elegant swords, delicately curved and wicked, single-edged knives, serrated and hooked. They were indiscriminate in the death they dealt; male, female, young, old, unarmed or armed.

Not that the warriors they encountered fared any better than the young or the old; the six killers moved so swiftly that most foes were dead before they had even realised they were under attack. Within moments of their appearance, the white robes of the assassins were stained and splattered red.

The alarm was raised by a brave cornu player whose life was ended after he had blown no more than a cursory note, but the brief sounding was enough; moments later, Deor, Breydd and a handful of Deor's household guard spilled from Deor's tent, armed for red war. No sooner were the dwarfs out of the tent than the White Ones were cutting a path directly towards them.

"Come then, devils!" roared Deor and, "Ule! Ule!" bellowed Breydd, the household guard taking up the call as they moved towards their attackers.

The assassins were almost impossibly quick. Deor, a warrior of much renown among his kind, was almost undone in the fight's first heartbeat. He swung his axe as he came in range, only to see a wicked cut slicing towards his head. It took all his strength to arrest the momentum of his strike and bring his axe up to block the strike. Even then, only the maille rings of his cote prevented his disembowelling by a slashed knife.

Doer spun on his heel as the assassin whispered past. The assassin casually beheaded one of Deor's household guard even as he turned

back to the dwarf Lord, cutting with his blade as he turned. Deor stepped in close, using the head of his axe to jab at the assassin; it wasn't a killing strike, nor even one designed to wound, simply to buy a moment's time and possibly knock the wind from his foe. He followed it with an upswing, the speed of which made a mockery of his stocky frame. That surprised the assassin and the white-clad killer wasn't quite quick enough to get out of the way. The tip of Deor's axe sliced through cloth and skin, flicking blood into the air. It was a cut, nothing threatening, but nonetheless the assassin backed off a pace to take stock.

Deor did likewise, eyes flitting around him. It didn't look good; Deor, Breydd and three of Deor's guard were alone in an ever-moving circle of six dancing killers. The assassins twirled around them, first looking toward their prey, then spinning and ensuring no other foes came close. A loose circle of dwarfs had formed around the assassins, but none dared close with the enemy; here and there was a warrior armed with a crossbow or a handgun, but there was not a hope that they would risk a shot, not with the Lord and his commander in the line of sight.

And then there was another flash of movement.

V

The Blade appeared from nowhere, exploding silently into the heart of the dwarven throng. He swung a slender longsword, beheading the first of the White Ones before the others had even realised he was there.

Three of the White Ones leapt at him, forming a triangle of attack. Their strikes from their weapons came all simultaneously. Against almost any other foe in Mantica, such an attack would have proved impossible to survive, but the Blade was one of the supreme swordsmen of the age. He ducked and lunged, span and parried, attacking and defending with the same stroke, foiling every attack, breaking through every defence. It was exquisite, unbelievable work and the White Ones realised in a heartbeat that they were outclassed. Utterly and completely outclassed.

They knew fear then and it was not a feeling they were accustomed

to. Their nerve broke in an instant. They tried to flee but there was no escape; the Blade was total and complete ruthlessness given form. Three heads flew from three necks in what seemed to be a single stroke.

The two remaining assassins, still hovering around Deor and his warriors, sprang away, sudden terror giving extra speed to their legs. But no sooner were they a step away from the Owl than the loud retort of several handguns shouted, echoed by the whicker of a half dozen crossbows. Not all the missiles found their mark, but enough did that the pair stumbled then fell. One dropped motionless, the life ripped from him but the other staggered up, body torn, leaking blood profusely. Breydd made to finish him but Deor stopped him.

“The right is mine,” he said. He stepped up to the assassin, who tried in vain to ward him off. Deor brushed aside the assassin’s hand and kicked him back to the ground.

His axe swung, just once. The wet crunch of the strike made those nearby wince to hear it. Deor took up the severed head and stared into the dead eyes.

“Elves,” he spat.

“My Lord Deor!” a worried cry made him turn; Areg was hurrying towards him, eyes alight with fear. He took in the carnage around him even as he stepped into the midst of it. “My Lord Deor, are you hurt?”

Doer let fall the elf’s head. “I am not,” he said. “Thanks to him.” He nodded at the tall, purple-clad warrior standing motionless a short distance away.

Areg turned, noticing the warrior for the first time. The colour drained from his face.

“Hello Areg,” said the Blade.

The Chronicles of Grelink

by Ryan Shaw

Dry and dark, the smell of leather, old straw and fetid meat, a goblin's nest is a thing of beauty and perfection, built around a stick forced into the ground, it grows with its inhabitant. The only present a goblin is ever given is said stick. The young goblin has two options, to venture into the world cracking kneecaps or to create a “home”. However, this matters not as there are plenty of sticks in the world and in a few days the goblins that deserve to live will have started building a nest, and at least beaten a badger to death. Or died trying. Goblins save a special hatred for two things, and one of them is badgers.

Any goblin with a lovely badger skin rug, cloak , cowl or flag is hoisted to the lofty halls of the bosses part of the camp, and if they last for more than an hour, join the ranks of the bosses best bruisers. This is the very first evolution of a Goblin tribe, the division between the common rabble and the black and white clad elite. Grelink, was a member of the rabble, out to find himself a badger. Hopefully a blind one looking the other way.

The stick was a straight piece of hazel wood, it was Grelink’s, and was taller than himself, it's brown speckled bark was faded and cracked at both ends from where the little goblin jumped up and down on it until it was short enough for him to swing it around without losing his breath. But the natural beauty and complexity of the sticks freckled skin, and cool, refreshing sensation of moss beneath his leathery feet meant nothing to the goblin. All he wanted was his badger. And to get out of the woods and back to his nest.

“What’s a Badger even look like?” crowed a dry little voice behind Grelink, it was the voice of Bulp the only goblin, that would follow him into the woods. Gifted with a particularly round and lumped nose ,weepy eyes and long tongue, he was use to being bullied. And was only in the woods because Grelink was very, persuasive.

“Big and ugly, they live in huge caves and make loads of noise, cause they like to throw huge rocks at’cha, there taller than the

boss, have claws made out'a stone, and has one read eye, and one yellow one, one to see in the sun, the other at night."

"Then how are we s'pose to kill one?!"

A wide smile spread across Grelink's purple lips, as he stopped and turned to face Bulp. He waited for the straggler to catch up, nose swaying like a ponderous toadstool. And clasped his hand on Bulp's shoulder.

"That's a surprise"

The Living Woods

by Chris Livingstone - stlwarrior

Every man is born with the hunter instinct. Some choose to ignore it as they grow while a select few hone it to a sharp edge. Thorkell Silkbeard was one of the elite whose reliance upon his natural-survival instinct had saved his life on more than one occasion.

Standing isolated in the middle of a foreign forest that was densely packed with centuries old trees would have been nerve-wracking even for the hardiest of adventurer, but Thorkell Silkbeard was anything but ordinary.

The hair on the back of his neck was already raised before he heard the rustle of leaves. Thorkell crouched at the base of a massive tree and raised his round wooden shield. He readied his spear and listened.

Birds chirping, tree limbs shaking, and wind blowing was all that Thorkell Silkbeard heard. But, he *knew* that something was watching him; stalking him.

He continued scanning the area in front of him in a desperate bid to find the cause of his inexplicable anxiety.

Wait; was that a twig breaking over on the right? No. Was it back on the left? Why does it sound like the leaves are being stirred up? Am I going crazy?

Then, he saw it. The instantaneous feeling of relief that he had indeed heard something stirring was replaced with shock and dread. Two perfectly-shaped red circles were staring directly back at Thorkell from behind seemingly impenetrable vegetation.

What the hell is that…?

Before the dazed raider could conclude his thought the creature lunged towards him. The monster was a half-head taller than Thorkell, had thick-muscular green skin under its ancient-brown leather clothing, and had a long-protruded jaw that contained

vicious sharp teeth. It emitted a ferocious growl as it raised a crude metal blade. No sooner was the weapon raised then it was powerfully swung downward.

Thorkell Silkbeard had the presence of mind to take the blow on the iron band that encapsulated the wooden shield that he carried. The violent collision produced sparks that temporarily blinded Thorkell. He knew he was in mortal danger.

In a helpless state, the Northman thrust his spear in the general direction of the monster. Thorkell was not surprised that his attack had not found flesh, but he was bewildered when his spear was sliced in half. Shaking his head back and forth in an attempt to get his pupils functioning properly again, Silkbeard opened his pain-filled eyes just as the creature was cleaving downwards at his helmet-covered head for a second time.

The attack, if it connected, would have split the northern warrior in two.

Thorkell defended himself when he ducked down underneath the protection of his large shield that he clasped tightly. The metal was stronger however, and the savage blade tore through the wooden-butted plank with ease. Luckily for Thorkell, the shield, while utterly destroyed, had saved his life.

With his chances for survival slimming every second, Thorkell opted to go for a sneaky defense instead of his usual brute attack that would obviously not work against this foe. He released the handle of the broken spear as he slid his rune engraved hand-axe out from his belt. Then, while the green-skinned monster grunted and raised his blade to finish off his prone prey, Thorkell reared back and snapped his wrist forward driving his hand-held axe into the exposed ankle of the nightmarish monster.

The hand-axe tore through flesh, cartilage, and muscle. But, even with Thorkell's superior strength, the throwing axe was unable to sever bone and instead it was buried into the base of the creature's fibula.

Thorkell Silkbeard had traveled and experienced more than any

man that he had ever met. Yet, nothing in his journeys could have prepared him for the inhuman and unholy howls that emanated from the throat of the animal that was trying to kill him.

Amazingly, the beast, after dropping its barbarous weapon to the ground in agony, kicked the prone Ardovikian in the lower part of his larynx with his good foot. Immediately Thorkell's eyes bulged and his body shook in the effort that it took to gasp for life-sustaining air.
When the main contingent of the raiding party finally reached Thorkell, he was breathing heavily and was unable to speak. However, after seeing his shattered shield and his broken spear the seafaring warriors all knew that their strongest champion had met his match.

Some of the others spread out to secure the area but no trace of the green-skinned monster was found. But after finding Thorkell in the state that he was in no one doubted the story that he told around the blazing campfire later that night.

Just what was that thing? And gods help us if there are more than a few of those creatures out there…

A Power Arisen

by Maxwell McDouglas

Death is the province of the south. Most would whisper that this is due to the Ophidians mastery of necromancy, but they were neither the first inhabitants of the desert nor the first to master that black art.

West of Ophidia, in the deepest reaches of the dunes, lies the city of M'henkhara.

Predating the god war by a thousand years, the city was the largest of those that had rose across the desert's only river. In time, it came to dominate its rivals and become the center of human culture in the south. Ruling from their vast copper sheathed pyramid-palace, the kings of M'henkhara commanded armies of thousands.

Once a metropolis of life and vibrant with culture, the god war brought the city of devastation.

The sorcerer-kings of M'henkhara were the first to practice necromancy, although it was not called such then. They spoke with the spirits of their ancestors for guidance and preserved their dead. In this they served their god, the celestian Horek'kha, who had power over the sands and prophecy.

Then came the prophecy. The spirits muttered of dark days ahead, and the prince of the city was woken by a nightmare of blood and fire raining from the sky as the gleaming figures of giants fought. The king in desperation invoked Horek'kha for his wisdom.

To him appeared a figure made of gold in the form of man with the wings of a falcon. The god-being told his subject of the coming war, and that to protect the city and the people the king would have to cage him within the capstone of the pyramid and await a “golden-masked man, who will bring m'henkhara glory renewed.”

This the sorcerer-king did. Words of power were inscribed upon the capstone and filled with silver. The king retreated to his throne to await the golden one, even as his viziers bound the avatar of

Horek'kha within the glowing peak of the pyramid.

The elves of Moon-pool eyrie, sensing the massive flux of magic needed to complete the ritual, attempted to dispel it. The ritual however was too far gone to halt. Horek'kha was imprisoned, but the magical backlash caused by the elves interference made the sands rise up and bury the cities of the desert.

Thus was the M'henkharan empire laid low, but horek'kha saved from inevitable destruction by the actions of Calisor. Thus did M'henkhara sit, buried for two millennia until the coming of Kha'sebek.

A human of Basilea looking to restore the peace of a bygone age, Kha'sebek had sought out the faceless one, Mhorgoth, to learn the ways of the dead. He became the first and most powerful of the great necromancers pupils.

Kha'sebek excelled and eventually rose so far in his master's crazed eye that he was allowed the ritual of the mask, becoming faceless like his master, and released from tutelage.

Having read of m'henkhara among the bloodied tomes of Mhorgoth's library, Kha'sebek journeyed into the deserts, his magic sustaining him, until he came to stand before a massive sand dune. Dwarfing its neighbors, there could be no doubting the resting place of the pyramid of M'henkhara.

Drawing all his power to him, the lich-lord released it in a titanic spell which blasted away the sand of millennia. The excess magical energy invigorated the corpses within the city and its surrounds, drawing their souls back from ages within the grey twilight.

Entering the city through its great central gate, kha'sebek was greeted by the remains of a thousand years of royalty, who as one bowed to him. Thus was the city of M'henkhara revived, and its new golden-masked king crowned.

Tân-y-loar

by Matt Gilbert

“THANK YOU CHILD. An old man like me likes simple comforts.”

“And here’s your blanket Ur-pa.”

“You are a good girl. Now, it’s nearly the hour of the Wolf. The light is failing and you should be in your bed before the People come for you. Now don’t giggle girl, the People are not some childish fancy. They are real. They are dangerous. I have seen them.”

“Is that what they look like Ur-pa? They look strange. They don’t look real”.

“They are real enough my dear and yes, that carving on the wall there is a good likeness. Yes, take it down and hold it in your hands. That’s it, careful now. See how lovingly the figure has been carved from the wood. Close your eyes. Can you feel it? It feels alive, like the carving has sustained the wood and life still flows through its core.”

“How do you know about the Faery People Ur-pa? You’ve never left the village”.

“Ho ho, child you are too young to remember. Before even your father was born, I was one of our village’s Trakken, tasked with guarding the annual caravans plying the trade routes between the great plains here out to Galahir and into Letharac. One year I even went so far South as Primantor on the shore and took a ship – a ship! Such a sight you’ve never seen and the sea – I’ve never seen so much water. But that is another story. We have a little time and you are old enough to stay up a while longer. So settle down and I’ll tell you how it is I have seen the Fey.”

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THE AIR WAS cooling. Even under the trees where the temperature was reduced due to the shade, we could feel the turning of the

seasons; the heat and wetness of the summer yielding to the drier, more tepid climate of the fall and the inevitable chill of winter. The visual cues were there too; the colors of the forest beginning their transition and the odd leaf here and there, drifting down to the floor to be lost amongst the roots and undergrowth. What was a canvas of green when we had arrived eight weeks previously was slowly transforming into what I knew would soon be a riot of browns, oranges, yellows and reds. I had seen the forest like it once before when I was just a boy. It is a beautiful sight to behold.

We had been delayed. The caravan Master Per Vortlek had dallied too long we felt, haggling over the value of the Ox-hides we had bought with us in exchange for iron pots and tools. The Master wanted unmade iron too in the bargain, knowing the Smiths out on the plains were always in want of fresh supplies. The elves tolerate it you see but they consider it an unclean necessity. They are happy to trade it away for the right price. Per Vortlek was an unpleasant man, but he was good at his job, and fastidious in his negotiations, ensuring he got the best for his clients and his reputation. He did well that trip, so I believe he thought the delay was worthwhile.

We finally left Ileutherin on a cool, clear morning. Vortlek's hired and permanent caravan guards took up their positions in the train and the order was given to roll out. My father was in charge of our wagons towards the front of the train and myself and two others from the village had made the trip as the men entrusted with the village's wealth and goods. Once the train neared our village, we would break off and complete the last leg of the journey ourselves, trusting we knew the land and the risks travelling alone entailed well enough.

Two lithe elves had been assigned to us as an escort to see us safely through to the outskirts of the forest. The forest is a paradox: both wonderful and terrible. The maze of paths can be treacherous and lead the careless far astray. Without an escort it is a lucky man who easily finds his way through the trees. Even the widest trade routes, ploughed yearly by the traffic flow from the plains can deceive and mislead, taking the unwary deep into the darkest places. Deep into danger. They had been with us for two days, waiting impatiently to get moving but keeping themselves apart from our camp. Or at least as far apart as decorum permitted.

The elves spoke little to the men and never to me. I could only observe them from a distance. My father had dealt briefly with them in the past on previous trips, but this pair only conversed with Vortlek and then it seemed, only sparingly. Dressed in soft leathers that seemed to blend in and mimic the changing colors of the trees around them, they struck me as more a part of the forest than beings that dwelled within it. With long, slender bows lying across their backs, they eventually signaled for us to move out and without waiting for acknowledgement, struck out along either side of the path, leading the way.

As the wagons rolled out and began to pick up speed, Mok, a huge hulk of a man from the arid wastes to the South, hawked and spat into the undergrowth. “Haughty, skinny bastards.” he sneered, “Bet they’d snap like the twigs they resemble in a fight. Think themselves too good for the likes of us”. He glared ahead and began cleaning his nails with a dirty, wicked looking knife which appeared from somewhere inside his jerkin. He was a hired thug, selling his sword arm to Vortlek for the first time this year. He was distrustful, arrogant, aggressive and didn’t tolerate weakness, but as some minor incidents had proved on the journey so far, could handle himself in a fight and I suppose, if you are hiring muscle, that’s all that matters.

My father glanced at me to keep quiet but Mok had irked me.

“We need them to help get us safely out of here” I said as I lead my horse alongside the train. “Besides, they’ve done you no harm. It is in their interests to see the trade caravans in and out the forest so providing an escort can only make sense.”

“What makes you an expert, boy”? I remember the demeaning, goading emphasis on the last word just as clearly today as I heard it then. “You can’t be any more than sixteen summers old, you young whelp. I bet I could snap you too with one hand”.

I felt a hand placed firmly on my shoulder. My father reached down from his seat in the wagon and shook his head. “Leave us Mok. Go and bother someone else. Perhaps you’d like to tell our guides up there what you really think of them?”

Mok scowled and spat again on the path in front of us, before stalking off along the line.

“Steer clear of that one boy. No point getting into trouble.”

***

WE TRAVELLED SLOWLY for three days and it was clear our guides were getting irritated with the pace we were moving. They probably wanted to leave and be home as much as we did ourselves. I was glad they had accompanied us though, for the path we took through the trees was unfamiliar and lonely. Not another soul did we see during that time – just the colors of the vegetation to distract us from the monotony of the trek but after a while, even the majesty of the trees dwindled in our eyes as the path lazily rolled by under our column of trudging feet and creaking wheels. On the third evening, Per Vortlek called a halt as normal and the command rippled back down the line. My father pulled himself onto his plains-horse, a feisty and powerful piebald that would enjoy the freedom of the grassland once we finally left the forest behind us. He trotted up to the head of the train to confirm the situation and returned shortly calling out for us to make camp for the night.

“We are close to the edge of the trees Eran. We settle here tonight and then can be a way clear of the forest edge before sunset tomorrow.” He jumped down from the saddle and handed me his reins. “Here. Water the horses and then help Weasel build the fire. Tolk and I will prepare the food”.

Weasel and Tolk were the village’s other Trakken; skilled warriors and experienced scouts and guards. Tolk was the older, almost of an age with my father. The two of them often talked fondly of times when they were children and the mischief they had shared in. Weasel was younger, but still had at least five years on me and the scars to show it. His small pointed features and his knack of getting in and out of places he wasn’t wanted had earned him his nickname from a very young age. I never found out his real name. He didn’t talk much but was trusted well enough and fiercely loyal to the village. On a trade journey, where the village wealth was in your hands, such traits were essential. A village needs to know that the men who will take what they have to sell and bring back what they

purchased or bargained for will return no matter the odds. Life on the plains was harsh but trade sustained it and made it bearable, elevating the villages from their nomadic and tribal roots.

The mood in the camp was lifted that evening. The wagon drivers, guards and ancillary staff could all sense that this step of the journey was nearly over. The traipse through the forest had become monotonous but spirits were raised with the knowledge that we would soon spill out onto the plains, free from the forest in a place where we could feel the raw breeze on our faces – a feeling of liberty and the tug of home you can feel in your heart. Happy faces showed the glow of the campfires and at some point in the evening, after our supper, the singing started. We were an eclectic mix of cultures with songs to match. Each singer was increasingly well received and when Mok rumbled out a gruff yet surprisingly melodic ode from his homeland, even he received some cheers of encouragement such was the feeling of goodwill. As Mok finished his song there came from the furthest fire, a voice like none I had heard before, and rarely since. A second voice joined in and as the men around us fell silent, a hauntingly beautiful duet wrapped us in its gentle embrace. Tolk and my father closed their eyes and as I did too the music entered my mind and body, becoming an almost physical experience as images of ancient times and places, emotions and desires washed around me.

I don't know how long they sang for but our daydreams were harshly shattered when Mok snarled and, rising from where he sat alone, kicked at the pots at his feet, storming off into the dark of the woods and muttering under his breath. Perhaps he felt uncomfortable with what we had collectively experienced or perhaps his disdain for the elven singers eventually overcame his reverie but his reaction broke the spell and the singing faded into the night. Silence took hold and gradually the fires were doused and the caravan settled down to sleep.

A cold, dewy day greeted us as we stirred at dawn. After a brief, cheerless breakfast, the caravan organized itself for the last leg of the journey and slowly lumbered into the wearisome pattern of the last few days. I remember little about the early hours, but at some point I was aware of something strange, something different. Others had felt it too, and up ahead I saw our guides casting furtive looks into the trees and at each other. I shivered. My father and one or

two others down the line loosened the weapons in sheaths and slings. At the raise of a hand from the nearest elf, the caravan came to a halt. I could see nothing in the trees but the elves were looking West, and fingering their bows. As we sat there, the absence struck me. No sound. No sigh of wind, no rustle of leaves. No scurrying, no scrabbling, no song of any bird. The silence rang in my eardrums louder than sound it had replaced.

I saw the elves move split seconds before it crashed out the trees in front of them. I had seen and heard of these foul abominations – the warped and mutated consequence of experimentation and twisted magic. That mortals have conspired to willingly bring such grotesque monstrosities into the world defies belief. Born from the depths of the world and tempered with the fires of the Abyss, the huge, galloping, snarling and frenzied halfbreed thundered into the path and with one ferocious swing of its axe, cleaved the first elf cleanly in two. Not breaking stride, the fiend smashed into the closest wagon, stomping through the petrified driver the wood and the helpless horses and driving into our other guide who took a hefty blow and fell away. As wagon wood and bones shattered it let out an almighty, sonorous, terrifying bellow. Fear gripped me then I'm not afraid to tell you. The sound that thing made as it tipped back its head and roared its challenge stirred something in me that was primeval: the terror of hunted prey, the despair of the weak and the hopelessness of flight.

The caravan exploded into life. Guards from all around charged in with screams and war-cries in a multitude of tongues – united in a common cause and a common revulsion. The huge double-headed axe of the Abyssal monster chopped effortlessly left and right and its hooves stomped and lashed out at whatever the axe could not reach. The thing was a furious blur of fur and muscle, metal and blood. I saw three, four, five men cut down by vicious sweeps of that dreadful blade. As it turned I saw a hideous gaping wound down one flank which looked alive with an inner fire and, even in the brief glimpse I had, decayed and festering. Perhaps this is what had driven it mad – a mortal wound that was rotting its mind as well as its body. I'll never know for sure but after all these years, that is what I believe.

As I came to my senses and started to draw my own weapon, two things happened. Our second elf guide hauled his broken body into

a sitting position and drew his bow. Waiting but a heartbeat for a clear shot, he loosed an arrow which flew true and buried itself with a snap-crump deep into the flank of the beast. It roared in pain and reared up in an attempt to locate its tormentor but then out of nowhere it seemed, came Mok.

Bellowing his own cry Mok swung his huge blade in a scything diagonal sweep. The beast barely raised its own parry in time, the two weapons meeting with a bone shuddering impact. The two of them exploded into a bewildering and brutal conflict and we watched amazed at the strength and skill Mok displayed as he matched the hacking and slashing of the Abyssal while still managing his own attacks and counters. They fought like Titans and time slowed as we watched in horrified fascination; Death prowled the scene, watching for a mistake, a weakness: so one might fall – as must surely happen.

The Abyssal made the error, overstretching with an arcing swipe. Mok dropped and rolled under the swinging blade and cut his own across the open, livid wound in the beast's side. The monster screamed and I covered my ears the sound was so painful – a cacophony of spite, anguish, pain and suffering. It instinctively lashed out with its front leg, the hoof smashing into Mok's helmet and crushing his face and skull. The big man crumpled to the ground, the strings of life severed; the violent animation which had consumed his body extinguished forever.

A cry of despair rang out from the men and we all moved to fell the creature. But it seemed it had no stomach left or was too much in pain as it launched itself from the wreckage of the wagon and crashed through the man nearest to it as it made for the trees once more. The man stood no chance and was mercilessly cut down where he stood, the body trampled under the hammer blows of the beast's legs as it passed into the darkness. The numbness and shock hit me first but they rapidly dissolved into loathing and without thinking I kicked my horse into life and plunged into the forest after the creature.

"No Eran!" Tolk cried after me. "Stop, stop!"

The man had been my father.

***

I DON'T KNOW how long I ploughed into the trees: time was meaningless. I was blind to my surroundings and unconscious of where I was heading. My focus was reduced to a tunnel – a path of destruction ahead of me and the goading, sneering hand of revenge, both pushing me on and beckoning me forwards at once. My emotions churned within me just as my horse's hooves churned the soil beneath us. Sadness, guilt, hate and rage boiled through my veins and clouded my thoughts leading me deep into the forest and hopelessly lost.

It was getting difficult to see. The gloom was oppressive here. The shadows of the canopy seemed to merge and solidify, becoming a perceptible shroud that was relentlessly pushing down from above, the pressure squeezing the light and warmth from around me. Here, there were noises but they seemed as alien as the surroundings as they echoed through the twisting, interwoven branches. The cries of solitary birds reverberated mournfully through the canopy. The ground was damp underfoot and in the distance to either side I could make out a faint eerie glow from between the trees. Cursing my youthful recklessness I tried to turn to find my way back, giving up the chase now and knowing myself for a fool. I had left my father and the others just when they needed me.

To my increasing despair, the trail I had created had seemingly vanished. Either I had taken a wrong direction or the forest had regrown by some trickery I was unaware of. The darkness and cold of the forest began to seep inside me, both into my bones and into my mind. To my right was a glow again, dimly radiating through the trees. A cool white light that seemed to somehow spread a little warmth as it washed across the forest floor. With nowhere else to go, the temptation of the radiance proved too great. If I was lost here for the night, surely some light for a camp would be a good idea? I could find my way again in the morning.

As I approached the source of the light I could hear the dripping of water and could feel the dampness in the air. I slowed, now on foot and leading my horse which was becoming nervous and jittery. Trying to soothe the frightened animal my skin too began to tingle

as the trees opened out to reveal a shimmering pool of white, milky water. As we entered the clearing, tendrils of mist that had snaked across the pool seemed to retract at our presence and evaporate or curl away amongst the roots which trailed into the water. Out the corner of my eye but never there when I turned my head, I saw eyes, lights and things I cannot describe. Just there, on the edge of reason.

I didn't notice her at first but once I had, I don't know how I missed her. Sitting across from me, in the roots of a huge, ancient gnarled tree, sat a child. She was small and seemingly very young. Her pale green skin was smooth and delicate. Her clothing helped her blend into the woodland around her. What struck me most about her though was her cascade of hair – pure white it was and it seemed to have an inner sheen which fed from the light of the pool. I tied up my horse and moved cautiously round the edge of the water. She had not noticed me, so engrossed as she was in her play. She was studying what I took to be a doll of some kind, a beautiful slender thing. She began to hum as she turned it over in her hands and then began to use what appeared to be a crystalline tool to gently carve more detail into the figure. I sat down, entranced, not ten feet from where she worked. I had not eaten since breakfast and now tired and weary, my stomach betrayed my hunger.

The girl's head snapped round at the sound. I scrambled backwards until my back hit a tree. Rather than look startled, the young elf girl, for that's what I thought she was, looked curious. She cocked her head to one side and gazed at me with wide, yellow, feline eyes. I stared back and felt the black pupils pulling me in. I was helpless but not afraid. The tug was gentle and all my worries, guilt and fear began to ebb away. I felt the girl understood me more than I did myself. As I thought of my father a darkness started to pull me away, a small sob bubbling up as I battled with emotion. The girl smiled and moved to take my hand and the moment passed.

She stood and with a motion from a frail looking hand, indicated I should follow. Without hesitation, I rose and went to collect my horse so trusting I was of this strange being. She waited patiently, unafraid of the animal that was still visibly nervous and many times her size. She cocked her head again – the same gesture as before and held the horse's gaze. It calmed, relaxing with a snort and began nibbling the leaves of a nearby bush. Taking my hand once

more the girl led us through the trees, her footsteps silent and graceful where ours were loud and clumsy in comparison. Somehow she move effortlessly through along a path I had not seen before, whereas I kept snagging myself on thorns and had to swipe trailing branches to clear my passage. She turned back, smiled, and we continued.

We progressed for perhaps an hour like this, all the while the forest around growing darker as night fell. I was struggling and the elf girl must have realized for she whispered something into the air – the first sound I had heard her make. Her voice was hard to describe; like bells tinkling in the breeze but also with an earthy, gravelly undertone, all on the edge of hearing. She cupped her hands and from all around us, tiny points of light like miniature floating suns, in a multitude of pastel colors, lazily drifted from the air and found their way into her palms where they merged into a beautiful orb of pale golden light. With another breathy command, the orb rose to float above us and when we moved on, it followed, casting its light upon and around us so that my footsteps were more sure and my horse did not risk injury.

We stopped for me to rest. The girl must have sensed my weariness and indicated to sit. We had entered another clearing and what little light was left in the sky merged with the glow from our orb to cast spidery shadows all across the scene before me. I closed my eyes and leant back against a stone and that's when I sensed it.

The air had gone cold. The hairs on the back of my neck rose and an icy thrill spread through my veins. The forest had gone silent. Our guide had gone still and rigid, staring across the space into the darkness of the vegetation opposite. I knew what was coming but as the branches parted and the beast emerged from the gloom I could feel I had stopped breathing and could not move; muscles treacherous from the fear. The Abyssal stepped into the clearing, the light from our orb reflecting and running along the edge of the huge rune encrusted axe it held at its side. I was reminded of the summer storms we have out on the plains, where the sky lights up with the dance of lightning as it plays its way through the clouds. Sometime the cloud edges glow silver, pink, purple – as the sky fire explodes behind them and the mortals on the ground quake in fear. The halfbreed was the storm, its hooves the thunder and I could see the sky fire alive in the weapon it carried.

It was the look of fear in the eyes of the girl that ignited the fire within me. That and my horse screaming and bolting from the clearing, crashing wildly through the undergrowth and lost to me for good. Our guide, this kind and gentle creature who had soothed our fears and was taking us to safety now looked frail, small and vulnerable. Anger and memory returned. Anger at what the brute had done to my father and anger at the distress the child was now in. I scrambled to my feet and, grabbing the girl by the arm pulled her behind me and into a hollow under a huge tree root. As I pulled my sword free the Abyssal raised its axe and roared into the night; the same horrific cry that had paralyzed me before but which now fuelled my anger and infused me with a heady rush of blood. Huge rippling muscles launched the monster across the clearing in two giant strides and our weapons clashed with a screeching metallic ring that bounced around us in barely muffled echoes.

I blocked. I blocked again. It was all I could do to defend myself and the girl from the fury of the beast. As I fell to one knee pushing the child further into the hollow I glanced into the face of our tormentor and stared into the fire of hatred burning in its crimson eyes. I stared into the Abyss that day, and but through force of will to tear my gaze away from the depths of the hell I saw there, would be dead now, my soul trapped in a demonic limbo within those terrible eyes. Of this I am certain.

The axe crashed down and my weakened arm snapped with the blow as I raised my sword to parry. I cried out as the weapon shattered and flew from my useless hand. The monster snarled in triumph and reared up to bury its hooves through my skull. Just as the end was upon me, I saw the shadows move behind it – unfurling themselves from a tree and leaping onto the back of the Abyssal with a resounding leathery snap of wings and a piercing screech. Razor sharp claws dug onto the flanks of my attacker and scaled jaws snapped around its neck, trying to find purchase. The Abyssal reeled backwards, desperately trying to dislodge the bark-wrym, for I now know that's what it was, while avoiding the biting, searching teeth. It slammed itself into a massive trunk attempting to crush the sylvan-drakon with its bulk but the wrym wriggled clear at the last moment and dropped to the ground.

I watched in shock; numb with pain, apprehension and wonder as

the two monsters fought in front of me, locked in a whirlwind of snarling, ripping, bloody combat. The bark-wyrm was trying to claw the open wound I had seen before on the halfbreed but screeched in pain as the huge axe blade bit down savagely into its wing. Just before the Abyssal could follow up there burst from the trees a host of creatures which seemed to boil over the ground and surround the monster. Green skinned elves, surely the kin of the child, leapt through the branches planting arrows with unerring accuracy into the body, the shoulder and face of the fiend. The throng which roiled over it confused my eyes. I saw animals, sprites, fairies and things for which I have no name. So many of them – snapping, tearing and clawing. As my vision faded and a veil of darkness engulfed me, the last thing I saw was the Abyssal disappearing under a rolling blanket of death; the last thing I heard, an horrific scream as a wicked soul was dragged back to the depths of hell.

***

I AWOKE WITH a start. The girl was gone and I had been propped up in her place in the hollow. My vision was cloudy but I could see a light such as the orb had made and as my sight cleared I started in fright at the being sitting cross-legged before me. So alike the child she was: green skinned although not as pale; slender and alien. Her angular ears were visible through silvery hair and her high cheekbones and complexion suggested youth but her eyes, the same, yellow, cat-like eyes regarded me with wisdom seemingly beyond her years. My movement had caused me to wince in pain and she cocked her head in a way very reminiscent of the child. I heard her voice yet her lips never moved.

“You are wounded plainsman. You are trespassing and you are lost. You were not invited here and yet here you are.”

I could only stare back. My wits had left me and I knew not what to say. I felt her there, a gentle yet firm presence inside my head.

“The beast is dead. The taint erased from the forest. My daughter tells me you fought for her. Protected her. Why?”

“She is just a child” I managed to stammer “she stood no chance against that thing. It killed already today. It kill… “ I caught my

breath “It killed my father. I wasn’t going to let it take another life”.

“My daughter can take care of herself.” A faint smile touched her lips. “She also shouldn’t talk to strangers”. Rising to her feet she looked down at me where I sat supported by the tree.

“You were brave and foolish and more the latter. However,” I felt a tinge of compassion flow through our connection. “you did what you thought was right and perhaps saved my daughter from harm. Your rash action has saved you from death. We do not tolerate unannounced guests.” She gestured to the clearing behind her. “As you saw for yourself”.

She turned back and knelt down beside me.

“You must return to your kind. We will do this for you. This time”.

She placed her hand on my damaged arm, so light I could hardly tell, but suddenly a warmth began to spread from her fingertips and a wave of drowsiness rippled in its wake, washing through my aching body. Sleep began to take me but I needed to know.

“Please, “I slurred, “what is her name. Your daughter’s name?”

The Fey regarded me quizzically, those deep, golden eyes holding mine as I fought to stay awake.

“Your crude language cannot express her true name.” She looked thoughtful. “And I would not tell you even if it could. However, her friends call her Tân-y-loar”. She looked up at the sky and then back down at me. “Moonbeam.

Sleep wrapped me in warm, muffling, comforting slumber.

***

WHEN I CAME to, it was dawn. I was lying on the ground next to a wagon wheel, wrapped in a blanket. I raised my head slowly and watched my breath blow cloudy patterns in the cold morning air. Gingerly, I tried to move my arm. But for a dull ache, nothing more than you would get from sleeping on it, there was no sign of injury

and no pain. Had I been dreaming? It had all seemed so real. I rose from my bed and was adjusting to my surroundings when I heard a cry of surprise.

“Eran! Is that really you? We thought you lost boy. Gods be praised you are alive. Your father has been beside himself”.

“My father? He’s not dead?”

“No lad” Tolk put his hand on my shoulder. “Cuts and bruises, but it’ll take more than a beast like that to kill that man, the stubborn ox that he is. Don’t tell him I said that mind.” He winked at me then pulled himself up to his full height.

“You acted foolishly and abandoned the caravan. Your father is not happy. You will be punished for this and your judgment called into question.” He indicated a wagon further down the line. “He tried to persuade the Master to wait until this morning, hoping you would return. Luckily for you, our elf guide was too injured to move us out so has been taking the time to gather his strength. He must have communicated with his like somehow. Two more of ‘em turned up last night and we move out this morning. Gather your things and get ready to go. It’ll be hard for your father when he sees you. You have shamed the Trakken” His face softened. “But he will be glad to see you nonetheless.”

I felt shamed, stupid and alone. Would people really believe what had happened if I told them anyway? I wasn’t sure what I believed myself at that moment either. Everything seemed so surreal. Dreading the day ahead and the journey back to the village to come, I stooped to pick up the blanket I had woken in. As I gathered it into my arms something slipped out and landed with a wet thump on the ground at my feet. In the dawn gloom I couldn’t see what it was but as my groping fingers located it and drew it to my face my heart skipped a beat. In my hand I held a beautifully elegant, expertly carved length of wood, the likeness of a Fey looking back at me from what I had previously taken to be a child’s toy.

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“ARE YOU STILL in here? She fell asleep long ago you know and the fire has gone out.”

“Yes but the story had to be told. I’d like her to know.”

“I think she fell asleep before she found out.”

“Ah well. It is a good story. It is worth telling again one day.”

“Come now Ur-pa. You’ll fall asleep yourself. Kiss her goodnight and then leave her be. I’m going to pour us a drink.”

The old man gazes down at his grand-daughter and lightly brushes some hair from her face. The girl has fallen asleep holding the carving.

He bends down and kisses her on the forehead before pulling the blanket up to her shoulders.

“Yes, it is a good story” he says. “Goodnight Moonbeam. Sweet dreams”

The Keep in the Forest

A Tale from the Kings of War RPG
by Jonathan Hicks

The companions spread out in a line, not more than ten paces from each other, and descended into the valley. The town at the bottom had all but vanished; there were some traces of buildings, foundations of larger ones and rubble from others, but very little to suggest that a settlement once existed here. As they passed through there was evidence of a dried-up stream and the thick stone of a road running along the base of the valley. It had cracked and split as ferns and weeds pushed their way up into the light, and the roots of new trees had heaved the stones and rocks to one side. The wild had reclaimed the valley floor.

They then began the ascent up the other side of the valley. Although Tere had suggested patience he had also taken his shortbow from his shoulder and strung it, but had not notched an arrow.

When they were halfway up the hill a cackle rang from the trees, a laugh that sounded like stones being dragged along a washboard. It was disconcerting and out of place in this area of beauty and nature, and the men grimaced, especially Grum who had obviously heard the sound before. He looked at Draybar and said, in as low a voice as possible, '*Goblins! Pass it on!*'

'Goblins, pass it on!'

'Goblins, pass it on!'

Knowing this, they readied their weapons.

As they ascended the hill the outline of the castle finally began to take shape. The trees had crowded about it, as if protecting it from the outside world, and the vines and weeds had covered the walls. It was a simple affair; there were four walls with a tower at each corner and a keep rose from within, only slightly higher than the protecting walls. As the elf Eyanur and his brother Eyon had said, it wasn't a large place and the keep didn't reach higher than the

tallest trees that surrounded it. The sun filtering through the canopy created a patchwork of light and shadow that covered the grey, bleak walls.

They were approaching it from the front and the great gate was closed, but it hardly mattered as to the right of the gate the wall had collapsed outwards, probably from neglect and wear. It wasn't a recent collapse as moss, vines and greenery had covered the mound. It appeared easy to traverse and one by one the men gathered on the outside of it.

The trail of smoke was winding its way into the air from just beyond this collapse but none of them could see the fire or if anything attended it. They all kept low and quiet as they came together.

'The fire in the courtyard will be a sentry,' the dwarf Grum said, obviously knowledgeable of these creatures. 'Probably one or two, depending on the size of the raiding party.'

'How do you know it's just a raiding party?' Tere enquired, his human eyes narrowed.

'Because if it was a warband this keep would be swarming with them and there'd be a lot more fires. Now, I'm thinking seven to ten of them, probably someone big in charge, so we take the sentries fast and quiet.'

Draybar, a human lady of barely twenty summers, hefted her crossbow. 'Shall we shoot them?'

Grum nodded. 'Indeed. You, Tere and Cuthred can move up…'

'Wait,' Cuthred, another man, hissed. 'You're not in charge.'

'Grum has dealt with goblins before, we'd be wise to listen,' Tere suggested.

'I agree,' Eyanur said. 'Grum?'

Grum briefly looked at Cuthred's grimace of displeasure, smiled and

continued. ‘If we take the sentries as fast as we can then get to the keep and get inside, take them by surprise. Goblins are easy one on one but when they’re in a group they can be vicious, they’ll try to swarm over you. If they do come out then spread out, try to keep them apart, don’t let them group up too much. It’ll be easier.’

‘Sounds like you have had a lot of experience,’ Tere said to Grum as he readied his bow and took position with Cuthred and Draybar. Eyanur and Eyon waited just behind them, ready to follow them up and over the rubble after they had fired on the goblins.

‘The War to the North lasted eight years. I fought in the army but I also travelled with scouts and skirmish parties trying to root goblins out on our flanks who were giving us trouble. Yes, I learned a lot.’

Tere nodded and was about to say something else when Cuthred snarled, ‘Are you ready?’

‘I am.’

‘Okay. I’ll count to three. One.’

They all took deep breaths and focused on the fight that would no doubt occur in the next few moments.

‘Two.’

They pulled back on their bows. The wood creaked softly. Draybar licked her lips in anticipation.

‘*Three.*’

As one they rose from the rubble to see two goblins stood at the campfire. They were green-skinned and hunched over, with bowed legs and long arms. Their armour was what they could scavenge from their victims, patches of chainmail, leather and even plate. Their weapons were notched and serrated axes and one of them had short throwing spears in a quiver over his shoulder. They were mumbling to each other, watching the sparks of the fire flicker and the smoke curl upwards.

With a thud two arrows lodged into the first goblin's chest, whilst Draybar's crossbow bolt took the second one in the throat. Without a scream of pain or a cry of warning the two creatures fell to the ground, dead.

As quickly as they could the companions hurried down the other side of the collapsed wall and into the courtyard. It was strewn with debris and filth, the wood of buildings that would have been propped up on the inside of the walls obviously used to shore up the other walls or used as firewood. Like the outside it was overgrown and young trees sprang up here and there.

Directly across from them were the open main doors of the keep and they could see the light from another fire flickering inside. They ran quickly and quietly across and ran up the steps, weapons at the ready. When they reached the door they all came to a sudden, sliding halt.

Inside, the hall was empty apart from several rotting wooden benches piled up against the far wall behind the raised place where the master of the castle's seat would have been. In the centre of the hall was a small fire, and around this fire were nine goblins, all eating fresh uncooked meat and drinking filthy water.

But it was not the goblins the companions were staring at. On the opposite side of the fire was a huge figure, a creature so bulky in its armour that it must have easily towered ten feet. The armour was beaten metal, like someone had simply taken sheets of iron and nailed them onto the monster. The helmet was covered in horns, the shield that it now took up had a wicked spike protruding from the centre and the huge curved serrated sword it slowly raised in one hand would have been a two-handed weapon in the hands of a normal man. It stood to its full height, the firelight making it glow as if possessed, and it crashed through the fire, scattering burning wood and embers everywhere.

Grum took a step back, his hard face now twisted in shock and horror.

'*Giant!*' he roared, and ran back down the steps.

The men scrambled down the stairs. Tere and Cuthred both shot at the giant as it crashed through the hall, swatting goblins out of it's way in its efforts to get to them, but one arrow simply bounced off the armour and the other penetrated the metal but appeared to do very little.

They all headed back to the collapsed wall but Eyon slowed. 'What do we do?' he cried.
'We run!' Grum shouted as he started to ascend the rubble.

'But we have to clear this place…' Eyanur began, but he was cut off by a mighty bellow of rage.

The giant stood at the top of the steps, the table-sized shield and sword raised into the air as it roared its fury. Eyanur and Eyon looked at the retreating men, then at each other.

Then the elves readied their weapons and faced the giant as it stamped down the steps.

Tere watched the brothers stand shoulder to shoulder, one with sword raised the other with spear levelled, and he gritted his teeth.

They seemed like children with toys in front of this huge black-armoured creature. Without truly thinking about what he was doing he dropped his bow, unsheathed his sword and unslung his shield from his back.

As he took position by the side of the brothers he heard Grum behind them crying out, '*You fools! What are you doing? Run! Run!*'

But Tere didn't hear what he shouted after that. The giant was upon them.

With a huge, ear-shattering cry it bought the sword down in a huge overhead arc. They all dived out of the way and it buried itself easily a foot deep into the hard ground, but the giant pulled it free with little effort. It then took a sideswipe at Tere first who was forced to dive to the floor to avoid it, and when the brothers stabbed at the creature with little effect it turned on them, batting Eyanur back and through the air with it's shield and thrusting at

Eyon with the sword.

Eyanur crashed into the piled rotting wood stacked by the wall and it smashed and splintered. He cried out in pain and rolled to the ground. The giant ignored him and concentrated on Eyon who ducked and dived out of the way of the wildly swinging sword, which enraged the giant more and more.

It was then the goblins finally appeared at the top of the steps and, emboldened by the giant's actions, came screaming down to aid.

The first one found an arrow in his chest the second was shot through the eye by a bolt. The others faltered and slowed as Cuthred and Draybar reloaded their weapons, and Grum came sailing through the air with his axe chopping wildly. He felled another two goblins before they realised what was happening.

'Get up, you idiot!' Grum was shouting. 'Get up and run!'

'The brothers!' Tere shouted back, and gathered his wits enough to skewer another goblin running at him.

'They're dead!' Grum cried as he downed another one. An arrow punctured another. 'The giant will kill them!'

Tere traded blows with one of the last two goblins whilst Grum faced off with the other. Tere glanced over to the giant as he fought and saw Eyon leading the monster away from his brother, jabbing the creature with his spear and shouting taunts. Eyanur was slowly getting to his feet.

He finally hacked the creature to the ground as Grum finished his and turned to help the brothers, but Grum grabbed him by the arm. 'Don't! You'll lose!'

'We have to try!'

'We fought thousands of these monsters in the War to the North,' Grum growled. 'Why do you think it went on for eight years? We have to run!'

Tere tore himself away. ‘Then run!’ he shouted angrily, directly in Grum’s face, and jumped over the bodies of the fallen goblins to get to the giant.

He dropped his shield and grabbed his sword in both hands and with a wild cry he leaped through the air and onto the back of the towering foe. Where the armour was tied together there was a narrow gap and the sword point slipped between it and into the giant.

There was a gush of black blood from the pale-green monster and it’s bellows of fury turned suddenly into screams of pain. It staggered forward then backward, and it tried to reach around to swat Tere off, dropping the huge sword and shield. When it realised it couldn’t reach far enough behind it started to thrash wildly but Tere hung on, wrapping his legs around it and hanging onto the sword hilt with all his strength. An arrow bounced off its armour as Cuthred tried another shot, but a crossbow bolt from Draybar slammed through the armour and buried itself deep. The giant roared again.

Knowing that the creature was intent on ridding itself of the man on his back Eyon and Eyanur stepped in. They jammed their weapons in the gaps of the giant’s armour now that they could get clear strikes, and before long there was black ichor pouring from a dozen wounds. As the giant grew weaker they stood back and it sank to its knees, then fell to its face. With a wheeze it exhaled it’s last breath as Eyanur despatched it with a thrust to the neck.

Slowly Tere stood, black blood covering his armour and face, his sword dripping with it, his long hair matted and filthy. He stared at Grum and then the others, and any traces of the friendly, smiling man they had come to know on their brief journey was gone to be replaced by a glaring, almost maniacal stranger.

‘*I do not run,*’ he hissed.

Battle of Gallohell

by Jason Flint

Lord Elethor was not amused. Standing around waiting for the master of the guard was just insulting. He was renowned in this area and the ignorance of the men was in his eyes, unbelievable. The petty whining of messengers from border counties was not worthy of the high lords of Golden Horns attention, so they came here to the guard house to plead for soldiers to deal with threats. He was not here for aid, and while he respected the men's fighting ability, they hardly suited his style of warfare. Shouting loudly and covering yourself in plate that offered no more protection than his fine Elven armor, but was four times the weight, was hardly progress.

The messenger in front of him was next, and his words caught the irritable Elves attention. After the usual dramatic pleas the man mentioned something about some wretched town called Gallohell. But it was not that which got his attention.

"Master of the guard, this mage, Orecarno has formed a pact with wildmen, goblins, but worse, he has a fleet! Dark Elven warriors set sail for Gallohell as we speak! They will sack it and burn it to the ground!"

"You have a large garrison, we have sent knights of Falkerk to watch over the construction of the wall already! A small raiding party and a few corpses are not worthy of our attention! You should have executed this foul being when you had the chance! Be gone!" came the angry response.

The messenger left, clearly traumatized at the public humiliation. Elethor was summoned, but he looked after the messenger. He'd found what he was looking for. Only that damn Wolfcurse would be so bold. The feuding was bitter, not at all helped by his foes insistence on calling true Elves, "weedy".

"Never mind" he murmured as he made off after the messenger

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‘My Lord, a messenger for the fleet’ announced his personal guard

‘Send him in’ he replied looking up from his war map

‘My lord’ the messenger said kneeling on the floor ‘The Dark Talon sends reports of an elven fleet making its way up the coast towards the harbor east of Gallohell’

‘Hmmm seems our brethren feel that this kingdom is worth protecting,. Whose banner flies?

‘The fleet fly the banner of High General Elethor and the flag ship is said to fly his personal house banner, My Lord’.

‘The weedy Elf himself is on his way here to try and stop me" he laughed "Interesting indeed,. How many days out are they?’

‘About two days to the harbor, and another two days to Gallohell itself My Lord’

‘Good, four days is more than enough time to end this and then prepare to meet Elethor in the field. Take these orders back to The Dark Talon; They are to engage using skirmish and delaying tactics on the elven fleet try to delay them or leave boats behind, so no large scale engagements. Also, inform the Black Heart and Kraken to send their Buccaneers raiding along the coast close to the harbor, only taking strong and breedable slaves. Put all other to the sword and burn them down, making sure there is lots of black smoke. Let's give the men and elves something to worry about: Do they split their forces to save the innocents or do they let them suffer to maximize their forces against us in the field?’ A cruel smile parted his lips ‘Also inform the necromancer Orecarno that he can have whatever is left of the coast villages for his ‘experiments.’ That should demoralize the enemy before we even engage.’

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The black clad warrior stood in front of him, and with his twin blades, he lunged. Too eager, as Elethor brought his great weapon swinging in a wide arc, cleaving the Elf in two and soaking his

decks in more blood. The last would-be boarder defeated, he observed his ship. Its once-elegant looks were now tarnished from the carnage, and the deck was so awash in so much gore it was a struggle to stay upright while his large, beautifully crafted sails were torn. He looked annoyed as he saw the rest of his fleet had not been touched. The surviving Twilight Kin were quickly disengaging.

"Why attempt to board only us, then flee? Why not try to break our fleet?" came the enquiry of his Seaguard warriors, who now sported dented shields.

"They try to slow us. Someone warned them we were coming; It will not work. Get those sails replaced, we make for Gallohell with all haste!"

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Wolfcurse heard his guards snap to attention, and he looked up from his map to face the most beautiful, lithe and naked Kin he had ever seen, if not for the fact she was dripping with gore from head to toe,

‘Ah my Lady of Blades you honor me with your presence.’ He shuddered inwardly as his survival instinct told him he was in danger.

‘Lord Wolfcurse this is purely a business visit, no time for pleasure I’m afraid.’ An evil smile split her crimson smeared lips as she flicked a look at the ornate dagger in her hand still dripping onto the carpet of his tent. ‘Be aware that my sisters and I have appeased our allies and they will be joining us in the forthcoming battle.’

‘Excellent my thanks you my lady,’ as he gave a small bow, ‘They will prove to be a great asset in the coming days. Also, it has been brought to my attention that the weedy Elf himself makes his way here to bring us to battle.’

‘Really?’ she purred, ‘Well that both pleases and excites me. It’s been far too long since we last danced with his elite guard.’ She let out a small laugh.

‘My lord!’ A messenger rushed into the tent, breathless. ‘News from the North…’ He stopped abruptly as a beautiful but bloody hand gripped him by the neck and a dagger was placed a short distance from his eye.

‘My Lady, please allow him to speak before you teach him the errors of his rudeness’

‘Very well, be quick. I grow bored, worm,’ she growled as she pushed the messenger to his knees, and gripped him by his hair, raising his head and exposing his throat.

‘Speak and quickly. My Lady does not like to wait.’

‘My Lord…. The Northern Orc tribes have moved early but have marched towards the Dwarven hold of Scrag Beard.’

‘What of the Goblins?’

‘They hold in the lower foothills still, my lord’

‘Very well, this is not a disaster. The Orcs will hold the Dwarf forces up, reducing the number of both the defenders and the overall Orc population; saves us two tasks. My Lady, I have a favor to ask of you, if you will? Please, can your sisters and yourself take up position in the foothills and keep the Goblins in check? This will also put you in the best position to attack the flanks of Elethors forces.’

‘My Lord, that seems like a reasonable trade. Now what of this one?’ she asked, drawing a line of blood along the messenger’s check.

‘In honor of the relations between the temple and my house, I offer him into your humble care and service, though I politely request you deal with him outside of the tent, my lady.’

A slight expression of irritation crossed her face ‘As you wish my lord. Good day, and may the blood comet bless your house.’

‘As it blesses the temple and our Kin,’ he replied automatically, not

wishing to push his luck.

He watched her stride from the tent dragging the now whimpering and sobbing messenger behind her as if he was nothing more than a disobedient child.

He shuddered, trying to push the fate of the messenger out of his mind, and turned back to his map, moving a few of the marker around,

‘Guard, go summon my commanders. We have much to discuss’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Yes, it’s coming together nicely now. With a full blood comet passing overhead in four days, on the dawn of the attack, in addition to his new allies, hindering the Dwarven reinforcements and reducing their numbers, Gallohell has no choice but to surrender or fall; Not even Elethor can deny me my ancestral right to raid this area.’ He grinned at the thought of the upcoming slaughter; Yes, it will be glorious and profitable.

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Gallohell smelt funny, Elethor concluded. The humans armories had worked day and night forging and fixing the garrisons weapons and armor. The large amount of horses and lack of stables meant they were tied up wherever there was space. It was a familiar smell of war, but didn't seem to suit this apparent market town. He sighed as he saw the Dwarven architect sat lazily outside the tavern, his only focus being stuffing his pipe.

"Where are the others?" Elethor demanded as he marched over, his guard following.

"The warriors will be here when they get here" murmured the Dwarf, still focused on his pipe.

"Listen Dwarf" Elethor scowled, "These are your walls we're protecting here, and I have committed a huge portion of my army, and all I see are builders, not warriors!"

The Dwarf finally raised his head, and looked up at Elethor, who was shocked the Dwarf was able to lift his head that high. He still believed Dwarves had no necks.

"And you listen to me Elf, the words been sent; There is nothing else for me to do. And if this is your contribution," he waved towards the assembled Elven warriors who were marching through the streets, "Then these men are doomed. You have no cavalry and few war machines, and those you have parading through the street would rather be on a boat than land"

The Dwarf went back to his pipe, and Elethor quickly turned and marched towards the unfinished wall.

"You let him speak to you like that?" his guard ventured.

"Only because he's right," Elethor mused as he looked out past the wall at the dust cloud in the distance. He needed more warriors but he had none; What else could he do? Then he spotted the deep forests to the East.

"Get the mage, I have an idea"

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Orecarno looked over his marching horde. In a short space of time, he'd gone from dwelling and experimenting in the ruins of Difetth, to raising an army from the ground. He was making pacts with anything greedy enough to be happy to march alongside the dead, and now marched on his hated foes; The men who dared cast him out, who said what he did was wicked and evil. Foolish and backwards views of men who were afraid of him. Now they will quake in their boots at the sight of his accomplishments.

He was irritated, however, at the Twilight Kin's reluctance to march with him. Despite giving them huge cuts of whatever wealth could be taken from Gallohell, they insisted on meeting him there. No doubt they wished to pillage and burn bordering villages.

In the distance he could make out the town's walls. They were tall,

but unfinished. He could see huge gaps where gates had yet to be put in. He had timed it well, this wouldn't be a protracted siege; This would be resolved in a day.

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The Dwarves had arrived. Elethor didn't trust anything that considered ankles a valid target in a fight, but he was grateful for more boots in the defense. They were quickly making wild boasts of what they'd accomplished and insisted this was a minor skirmish compared to their journey here. The younger men were gathered listening intently, but he noted the human veterans, clad in plate stood elsewhere. They didn't appear to be talking or boasting, with the only giveaway that they were exchanging words beneath their helms was the occasional nod.

"Lord Elethor!"

He turned and saw garrison commander Paldrik approach. A knight, a wealthy one at that. His plate ornate and expensive, and his sheathed sword seemed to be glowing. A trick of the light maybe.

"My scouts say they will be here in hours, . What news of your mage?"

"Be patient, he will return."

At that, there were shouts from the wall. Panicked men screamed of approaching monsters, and the Dwarves grabbed their axes and eagerly ran forward to the wall. Elethor ran faster though, and saw what had caused the panic. What appeared to be two huge hulking trees were taking great strides towards the city walls.

"Hold your fire, they are here to help!"

The tree herders halted and remained eerily still, and Andrel the mage rode forward, looking immensely smug. Elethor noticed the Dwarf architect from earlier was at the front, a look of awe visible even with his large beard.

"My final contribution" he hissed at the Dwarf as he made his way

back inside. It was time to mount up on his Dragon, as out of the corner of his eye he'd seen the horde form up on the hill. The Battle of Gallohell was about to begin.

The Background of the Sylvan Fey

by Matt Gilbert

Striking south from the Ruins of Vantoria, and across the Infant Sea, the shores of the Elven Kindreds can be found. Numerous trade routes crisscross the melt-water and while more direct and dangerous routes are possible, a ship's captain must be ever-mindful of the ocean's perils. Pirates roam the waves, and what lies beneath is best left to the imagination. Safely across and moving inland, travelers encounter well-trodden thoroughfares as they leave the coastal ports, but eventually the Wild takes over as the country turns to rolling grassland and climbs gently toward a range of hills.

The grassland gives way to a vast and ancient forest. To the west lie the mountains of Alandar, haunt of the dragon. To the east, the arid lands of the Eastern Kindred lie like a slumbering beast, the threat of the creeping desert ever present. But here, under the leafy canopy, lies the realm of the High Marshall and of Laraentha Silverbranch, Mage-Queen and forest Guardian. As a traveler, that you have got so far unmolested is a testament to your tenacity and cunning, for you have entered the Twilight Glades. You are being watched.

The living sculpture that is the city of Ileuthar can only be found by those who know the paths or who have a willing guide. For those that don't, the Glades are a perilous place, the shifting tracks and paths leading the weary journeyman round in circles, deeper into the undergrowth, never to return. The very air is alive with a pervasive energy, there on the edge of consciousness, primal and tantalizingly full of promise but always just out of reach. Even those not blessed, or cursed, with knowledge of the arcane can feel something on the edge of perception, a taste of something alien and cryptic. There is magic here.

The Elves of the Glades are different to the other Kindreds, more in tune with the natural world around them. Meeting them offers a mirror into the past glories of the race. They are a people cursed with introspection and regret, forever contemplating the follies of their ancestors who they believe turned from nature's path. Ancient practices and rituals were shunned in favor of building with stone

and forging with steel, spoiling the essence of their people forever. They hold true to the ancient ways, living in harmony with nature and close to the origins of the world-tree. They are an enigmatic people, as much a part of their forest as any bird, beast or tree that lives there. They nurture it, tend it and protect it with their very souls.

In the deepest, darkest and most treacherous parts of the Glades the charge in the air is palpable, the forest alive with purpose. Little light breaches the canopy of the ancient arboreal sentinels. The mists hugging the massive roots and snaking between the impossibly twisted branches sparkle and flicker with faerie fire, while will-o-the-wisps and capricious forest sprites frolic across the patchwork marshland of ponds and streams that lie between the trees. Those unlucky enough to find themselves in this place lie drowned in these fog-pools, armor and weapons rusting around their bones, their grinning skulls visible just beneath the surface, watching and waiting for a companion to join them in eternal slumber. This is the domain of the Sylvan Fey.

The Fey are Sylvan Kin who have fully become one with nature as they believe the ancestors once were. They are an extension of the living forest, spread from the seedlings of the world-tree and as ancient as the land on which it grows. Mysterious even by the standards of the other Elves in the Glades, the Fey inhabit the most magical parts of the forest, amongst the faeries and sprites that dwell there and are a rare sight to behold for the alien visitor. If they are seen, it is because they choose to be. Encountering them is often fatal for anyone foolish enough to encroach upon their world. There are stories of the Fey taking other Elf children in the night, never to be seen again. Elven scholars scare their young charges with tales of the Fey spiriting them away should they fail their lessons. These are perhaps just legends and fairy stories, for the Sylvan Kin and the Fey are on peaceable terms. The Fey are even known to lend martial support to the armies of the Glades, but such aid can be fickle, coming when and where the Fey so choose.

The Shadow Paths are known to both the Kin and the Fey. Accessed by the portal known as the Glade of Ways, the pathways offer the traveler routes to all places, but they are perilous and can be trodden only by those with great knowledge and power. There are few Kin with the skill and bravery to walk the Paths but the Fey use

them without thought. The Paths are simply an extension of the forest and world in which the Fey are a part. Magic seeps through them, and they through it. As a consequence, the Fey will travel across the world where they feel their presence is required. The largest concentration of the Fey outside the Twilight Glades is thought to be in the Forest of Galahir, East of the Abyss, on the edge of the Mammoth Steppe. No one truly knows and it is a brave or foolish man who would try to find out.

The Tale of Volaron

by “Sukura636”

Volaron pulled gently at the Drakon's reigns, coaxing the creature to bank right. The other two Drakon riders flanking him followed suit, keeping close formation. His keen eyes tracked the ground rushing below them; from this height, they could see for leagues without effort. Their quarry, however, was comparatively small, and thus required a constant vigil.

How long had they lived as nomads? Volaron could no longer remember. The war with gods were a faded memory for many, and the terrible events that beset his kin had their roots there. The Dragonmanes were an accursed people - constantly lost and roaming. Most of them had accepted their fate, but a few had set out to reclaim what was lost.

A spec of bone-colored stone caught his eye. It was nestled away in a rocky valley, nothing but a crumbling remnant. But he could pick out the shape, and the color of the stone. there was no mistake, the ruin had once been an elven waystone.

Volaron turned to inform the others, but they had also spotted something. At the entrance to the valley, the forces of the Abyss were massing. Infernal war engines were being hauled into place by mewling monstrosities, whilst black-hearted warriors chanted in dark tones for an approaching battle.

"We must return to Lord Simardil at once," he said, changing his steed's course to the south, where their camp lay.

"We will have to fight for this one."

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Simardil Dragonmane cast a watchful eye across the arrayed Elven troops. Rank upon Rank of spearmen stood tall and proud, ready for the upcoming battle. The steeds of the Stormwind cavalry paced and shook their heads, whilst their riders remained almost motionless. Amidst the formations he could see the ornate standard

of his house. The sculpted icon was held by his younger brother, Castien. The Dragonmanes had once been the ruling house of the city, and, in a way, they still were. Through daring and strength, they had kept their people's faith, and many of the city's forces still followed them to this day, despite all that had happened.

A figure gracefully stepped between the assembled regiments. The Mage-Queen Astalia seemed to inhabit a different time to the rest of the world; moving slowly, yet somehow always being where she needed to be at the right time. Simardil had tried to persuade her not to fight, for her death would spell the end for their kin, but she was defiant, and ignored his advice. He dared not order her, for he was no more safe from her wrath than the enemy. She carried the sacred flame of Sel'yn, and she was the only one who could bear it unharmed.

Across the valley, a deathly pall hung in the air. The armies of the Abyss were destroying the land with the fires of industry and malice. Simardil's keen eyes could see the rabble of slaves being goaded into place. Horrific creatures, a blend of mortal and abyssal, sparred; impatient for blood and death. There were armor clad warriors also, striking their shields and chanting praise to their twisted deities. The only thing Simardil could not see were the abyssal warmachines. This worried him; the destructive force of the mortars was legendary, and the enemy would not have taken to the field without their support. It was a standoff - both armies stood, assembled and ready, waiting for the first move to be made.

Simardil knew that he would have to be the one to make it. With a deliberate wave of his sword, he motioned to the largest formation of spearmen to advance. The elves had barely marched a few feet when several thunderous detonations announced the first salvo of mortar shells. Simardil could see the path of the projectiles, and traced it back to their origin; the infernal warmachines had been concealed behind a crest on the side of the mountain. This was the moment. He pulled at the reigns and his dragon, Barroth, reared and roared as he took to the sky. The three Drakon Riders swooped out of hiding and followed.

Forming a diamond, the four winged riders crossed the valley at speed, heading straight for the enemy artillery. They avoided the bombardment of shells and caught a clear view of the entrenched

forces. Three Angkor Mortars, with their abyssal dwarf crews working to reload and continue the barrage. As one, the flying cavalry force dived for the still unaware warriors; the noise from the detonations had masked their approach. The first two dwarfs died swiftly, raked by the claws of the noble reptiles. Others tried to reach for weapons in defense, only to be immolated by Barroth's fiery breath. It was over in a matter of moments. The one remaining crewman fled the destruction, back to whatever master he could grovel to. His task done, Simardil looked to the battle below.

The slaves had now reached the elven lines. They were being cut down easily by the disciplined spearmen. The rabble of orcs provided nothing more than a distraction, but a distraction nonetheless. Behind the hordes of slaves, Simardil could see troops of decimators approaching. At this short a range their weapons would be devastating; killing a dozen elves in the first discharge. He directed the Drakon riders to flank them, and they obeyed. They swept down from above and caught the dwarf gunmen with a rear charge.

Elsewhere on the field, scouts taunted the halfbreeds around, feinting charges and firing arrows into the monsters, taking advantage of the foes' bloodthirsty hatred. They could do little lasting damage, but with careful maneuvering, they put them into position to be charged in the flank by the Stormwind cavalry. The elite creatures proved a difficult foe to best, only stopping when the last of their number had been slain. The blacksouls had now been engaged by the bulk of the elven host, and were fighting hard. A giant of a dwarf, made all the more imposing by his immense armor shouldered his way to the front lines.

Simardil took to the sky and quickly landed ahead of the leader, crushing several of the blacksouls as he did. He leveled his sword at the enemy commander in a challenge. The abyssal lord roared, and charged.

The Summoning

by Jonathan Peace

1

The caverns of the Under-Dungeon echoed with the screams of a thousand captives. Locked behind doors of iron and hidden behind walls of stone that were slick with Basilisk venom, their torment was never ending. Dragged from their homes or snatched from their beds in the dark of night, these unfortunate souls were the playthings of their twisted captors. Strung up by their ankles they hung suspended over giant pits, their faces bathed in the ruby glow from the fires of the Abyss beneath them, while their tormentors sliced their flesh open with delicate cuts. One cut was insignificant, but a thousand of them, two thousand, that was another matter. Slowly they were bled, each scream captured and held forever in the souls of the Twilight Kin.

Dakarshae Kae walked along the corridor, her high boots clicking along the stone in a rhythmic melody. *Click-clack, click-clack*. She almost skipped along, her face contorted with insane glee as the screams lifted out from behind the doors as she passed. She threw her head back, running long spiked finger-blades through the dark trestles. At her throat a purple gem gleamed in the half-light. No chain held it in place, instead it appeared fused to her flesh, trapped within a binding of bright silver. Her pale skin danced with shadows, the firelight from the torches fastened to the slick walls flickered as a cool breeze glided down the passageway. A tongue, thin and red slipped from between her lips to lick away a droplet of blood that still lingered from her interrogation.

Oh how she had screamed. Her voice had risen high, bouncing off the cell wall, echoing back again and again with each exquisite slice. Another layer stripped away, another defence taken down. Oh, how she had sung...

Dakarshae tasted the blood and smiled. Another piece of the puzzle slotted into place, but she would keep that tasty morsel for herself. No one else need know the secrets the maiden had given up. No one but her.

For now.

All along the passageway, standing at irregular intervals were her Darksome Guards. Standing rigid for hours at a time, their blackened armor almost hiding them in the shadows, there was none other that she could trust to guard her captives. The Deepening was a section of the Under-Dungeon that few ever saw and none ever left. As she passed by, each one gave a brisk nod of their helm, their glaives snapping to high-alert in honour of their dark queen.

She came to what appeared to be a dead-end. The passageway simply ended with a large wall of rock. No torch filled the space, no door or window filled the wall. Without breaking stride, the Dark Queen of the Twilight Kin walked right to the wall, her lips spreading to whisper a single word.

"*Maeesha-hai...*"

The wall flickered for a moment then vanished entirely as she passed through. The sounds of screams faded as she left The Deepening, the wall reappearing as soon as she was through sealing all behind her, guards and captives alike.

The passageways of the Under-Dungeon weren't as dark as those within the Deepening but they were as sinister. They turned and twisted constantly, their edges rough and sharp. Created by the giant Basilisks that lived beneath the mountains of the world, the tunnels wound deeper and deeper into the earth, creating a vast network of corridors, rooms and hallways into which the Twilight Kin had fled thousands of years ago.

It was a dark tale lost within mist and shadow, where the Twilight Kin loved to dwell. It was a tale of betrayal and loss, of power and glory. The tale of The Sundering-Time was one passed down from generation to generation so that none should ever forget what had happened to them, so that none would forget what they must do. When the Twilight Kin had been cast out by their noble cousins, they had fled beneath the world, hiding themselves away where none would find them or dare to enter. Utilising their new found powers they had tamed the creatures of the dark and taken their

strength for their own. Wicked and twisted, they took on the mantle of the creatures of the night, using their strength and their defences as their own – poison and blade and stealth became their life – and the death of others.

Not only Basilisks roamed the labyrinthine passageways that ran under the surface of Mantica. Here lay the Under-Dungeon home of the Twilight Kin, but also Caster's Well, the Forgotten Glen and ShadowDown, all home to dark creatures and lost souls. These passageways of rock and stone led to the very Abyss itself in places, dark and twisted and hot, full of steam and fire. Even the Kin of the Under-Dungeon feared to venture too close to the territory of the dark Dwarfs, with their Abyssal creatures and arcane abominations. Gargoyles roamed these areas and worse.

Far across the surface world, in the dark realm of Tragar the Abyssal Dwarfs had built two vast towers rising high into the sky from which their noxious vapours would spill as would the cries of whatever new beast they created. These towers punched deep into the flesh of Mantica where they joined with the network of caverns and tunnels known as the Under-Dungeon. Zarak was the greatest of these towers, in whose bloated, burned walls dwelled the Abyssal King Hallak-Roi. Dakarshae shuddered to think of his touch, those metal fingers of his closing about her arm, each hiss of the steam that escaped the strange device that powered his wicked body. *And the heat. She couldn't stand the heat, all clammy and sweaty.* The Gods be praised she didn't have to treat with him often. Soon though, once more. Soon.

A large set of obsidian doors loomed before her. Beside them stood two Twilight Kin guards, their spears held across the door barring all. At her approach they slid back with a soft scrape of metal, one of them pushing open the nearest door for the briefest of moments to allow her inside.

Hanging from a set of metal chains in the centre of the room was a young Elf. Her body had been stripped bare and a dozen cuts bled red tears that dripped into a golden chalice beneath her. When she saw Dakarshae approach, a low moan sneaked out from behind the gag across her mouth.

The Dark Queen stood beside her captive and ran a bladed finger down the girl's side, leaving another red wound. “It appears you were speaking truth, dear one,” Dakarshae said in a soft purr. “Your tale was confirmed when I spoke with your beloved down within the darkness. How very delightful.”

As she talked, the jewel at her throat began to pulse, casting a faint purple light on her face. “He seeks the Bloodstone. A fool's game for sure, but if he's found a way to retrieve it...” Her hand rose to the gem at her throat, long fingers caressing it gently. Where the sharp blades touched, small sparks of energy rippled along its surface. Her voice dropped to a lover's whisper as she circled the girl. She ran the bladed finger of her other hand across the girl's naked flesh, digging deeper with each turn. “Endless possibilities and unlimited power combined. Long have they feared us and now thanks to you, I now know there exists a way to reach out to my sisters wherever they may be, behind whatever walls they are locked behind.”

The girl whimpered as another long slice was opened in her flesh. Blood ran down the bladed fingernail to soak Dakarshae's hand. She rubbed the hand across her face, smearing her pale flesh with the girl's blood. “Finally I can rise from the darkness and reclaim that which was once mine. But I will need help...”

Dakarshae left the girl and gathered the chalice from beneath her. Dark blood slopped over the sides, staining the golden chalice, turning it a dark bronze. It stuck within the runes carved on the sides, twisted shapes of bodies contorted in horrific poses. She raised the cup to her lips and drank deeply. When she took the cup away, her face was stained with blood. It ran down her chin to drip across the tops of her breasts.

“Heat and steam. Cold and frost. Wind and earth.”

The girl struggled against the chains once again but did little more than draw the Twilight Kin sorceress's attention.

“Not the Wind and Earth. Not yet. Her time will come, but not yet. Heat and steam, cold and frost...”

Dakarshae took the cup into one hand. The other opened wide, the

long blades at her fingers glinting in the light. She rammed them into the girl's chest, a horrible crunch of bone as they punched through. With a mighty heave she tore the girl's heart out and dropped it into the chalice.

“Cold and frost...”

The Dark Queen of the Twilight Kin closed her eyes, tilted her head back and drank deeply. With each new swallow, the gem at her throat pulsed more brightly. Finished she cast the chalice aside, her eyes burning with purple fire. Her tongue lapped up what droplets of blood had spilled across her lips and when she spoke, her voice was an excited, breathless whisper.

“Heat and steam...”

2

The blue flame flickered wildly as Dakarshae Kae entered her personal chambers. Her boots echoed from the cobbled flags of the Under-Dungeon, their steel tips glinting with blue light as she made her way across the chamber to where her visitor sat, their back to her in a display that was meant to intimidate the Twilight Kin Sorceress but merely amused her.

“I see you found your way to me with no problems,” she said as she slipped into the seat opposite her guest. She reached for a tall vial and poured herself a glass of wine. She didn't bother to offer one to the squat figure before her. Their kind don't believe in such pleasures, choosing to dedicate themselves to their dark craft. It was why he was here after all.

“There were – complications,” he said. A waft of superheated air rolled over Dakarshae, the faint tang of sulphur and copper hanging in the light mist that drifted from her visitors armor. She could see better now, seated opposite, that his travel cloak covered a set of gilded armor. Intricate patterns were engraved deep into the gold, and even as she looked they seemed to writhe and twist. The armor rested on what appeared to be a sea of red. She could see between the plates the roiling waves of lava that threw out a hot, red light. It mixed with the blue flames in the torches behind her to create a strange hue that flooded the chamber with a dark malevolent

presence. As her guest moved, steam hissed and the sound of metal gears turning click and clacked with a steady resonance.

“Nothing too serious I trust,” Dakarshae said, pouring herself another glass of wine. She savoured the taste, just as she savoured the carefully chosen words her visitor used. They both knew it had been her that had sent the Shadows to intercept his small retinue, ambushing them in the dark pass that led to the mountain entrance of the Under-Dungeon. She hadn't expected her troops to actually succeed in their mission, but it was a good way to both test the Abyssal Dwarf as well as let the Overmaster know she would not be an easy ally to have.

“Nothing my men could not handle. With ease,” he added.

It had been easy. Hallek-Roi, Overmaster of the Abyssal Dwarfs and King of the Mirror Tower of Kallek-en had travelled within a small force of Blacksoul warriors, their bronze armored forms packed tightly about the Overmaster. Either side were two troops of Decimators, their Thunderpipes held at the ready for the attack they knew was coming. It had been an obvious ploy, but one Dakarshae had been forced to play.

Her emissary had returned damaged; her face scorched and burned beyond all recognition. One of her hands had been cut away, the stump cauterised and a limb of gold attached in its place. The metal fingers held the message Hallek-Roi had wanted to convey, but so had the condition of the Twilight Kin emissary. The message was clear: the two Kingdoms of the dark must meet. But still, Dakarshae Kae could not let this go unpunished. Yes, she needed the Abyssal Dwarf and the secrets of the Abyss, but she could still send a message of her own. Two regiments of Shadows backed up by several troops of her Twilight Kin armed with crossbows, their bolts tipped with nightshade venom, had been sent to welcome her guest. They had not returned, save for one Shadow, his form twisted and burnt.

Though twisted with pain and beyond any care, he had managed to deliver his report, telling of the way the Decimators had been hidden already in the pass, their Thunder-pipe cannons blasting into the Twilight Kin as they struggled to find cover. Heat had melted

their armor to their flesh, the screams of the dying as they burned ringing from the rocks of the canyon pass. The initiative lost, the Shadows had charged towards the Blacksouls, but they had stood their ground, sweeping the Twilight Kin aside with heavy strokes of hammer and axe. Steam filled the canyon as another volley of Thunder-pipe fire roared down on the Twilight Kin that had survived the initial slaughter and it was only because of this that the mortally wounded Shadow had managed to slip away to get back and warn his mistress. His reward had been a quick death, Dakarshae herself slipping the knife across his throat.

Such were the delicate matters of diplomacy.

“I am pleased you weren't hurt,” she said.

“As am I, High Priestess. Now, to the matter at hand.”

The click-clack of gears sounded again as Hallek-Roi drew back his cloak and hood. His body was fully encased within a suit of armor of thick obsidian and cast iron. Hundreds of tiny plates all moved and clacked together as Hallek-Roi shifted in his seat. Quite how he had managed to sit seemed an impossibility to Dakarshae, but her attention shifted as he slowly rose. The whirr of some mechanism sounded as he got to his feet, steam hissing from the joints with each new movement. The ridge of gold that lined his neck plate also vented steam from small circular tubes that extended in a ring around his face.

“You wish to learn the secrets of the Abyssal Dwarfs, is that not so?” he asked as he began to pace. Dakarshae watched, near mesmerised by the strange little Dwarf. *His legs...* Hallek-Roi saw her stare. “Yes, they are metal. A magical fusing of flesh and steel that only we Abyssal Dwarfs know the secret to. Is that what you wish to discover, and if so, why?”

She brought her ice blue eyes back to the red fire of the Abyssal Dwarf. Moving from her seat, she walked beside the Dwarf, her slender legs glowing in the half-light that shone from between the armor plates of the Overmaster. “No. Your metal toys and weapons of heat and fire are not what intrigues me. Your bodies may be protected by such mechanisms, and your troops may be able to

bring the fire of the Abyss down on your foes but every suit of armor has its weakness."

Hallek-Roi's laugh was loud and long. "I think not," he said when he recovered himself. He stopped his pacing, a blast of steam venting from where the metal legs met his body. Trinkets had been wound within his beard and they danced together with each deep chuckle, making a soft ringing noise that lingered long after his laughter had died away. "We have created many fine weapons that would withstand your little arrows."

The Twilight Kin Sorceress caressed the Overmaster's cheek, her slender finger running down a long scar that pulsed with each breath the Abyssal Dwarf took. "Not every battle is won with brute force," Dakarshae said. Her finger slashed at the Overmaster's cheek, opening a thin line in the flesh. Hot blood ran out in a tiny stream.

His arm swept back, striking her across the face and knocking Dakarshae Kae backward. She crashed into the table, falling to the floor, one arm hanging on to the table to prevent her from totally collapsing.

"What did you do to me?" the Overmaster cried. He staggered back, the crump of his heavy footsteps mixing with the mechanical grind of gears. The flagstones cracked with each thundering step.

"I want to learn the secrets of the Abyss," she said, climbing to her feet. A thin trickle of blood ran from her lip. She wiped it away then licked the blood from her hand. "There is a girl, an Elf girl who has a power almost as great as my own. I want her."

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Hallek-Roi crashed to the floor. His face, once a constant bloom of red was now as pale as Dakarshae's skin. Steam vented in ragged bursts from the tubes around his neck. A low groan came from within his gilded armor. Dakarshae Kae slunk down beside the Abyssal Dwarf, her face close to his.

"I want the secrets of the Lower Abyssals. I want their strength, and

you can help me get it."

Hallek-Roi stared deeply into the eyes of the Priestess. Something burned deep within, hotter than the fires of the Abyss and the Overmaster found himself nodding, agreeing to her wild desires.

"Now stop whatever poison you cursed me with," he demanded.

"Oh, this," the Priestess said tracing the thin cut in his cheek. "That was nothing, merely a taste. You'll be fine in a minute or two."

Fast as an eagle, she swooped down to kiss the Abyssal Dwarfs cheek, then swept away to make preparations for the ceremony to come. Hallek-Roi watched her go with hate in his eyes.

***

She had changed for the ceremony. Gone were her usual robes, discarded for something more suitable to the situation. She now wore a full warrior's head-dress and armor bodice, the red-gore colouring edged with gold. Around her waist a girdle of Basilisk claw clinched tight, while across her left shoulder was a spaulder that rose to a sharp point. Dark sigils had been etched into the armor – for protection, the Overmaster had said. He had personally overseen the craftsmen as they carved the intricate symbols, making sure no mistake was made. Around her neck, a gorget of spun steel fastened to the lower part of the head-dress, creating the perfect protection for Dakarshae's head and face. Her black hair billowed behind her, set into a sharp pattern with aged wax. Dark robes of a deep blue hung from her waist, draping around her naked thighs. Long boots the colour of the darkest obsidian finished the ceremonial attire.

Dakarshae strode across the chamber to where Hallek-Roi stood beside an obsidian font. All the torches in the chamber save one had been extinguished, throwing the room into near darkness. Just the soft glow from the single torch illuminated the chamber, throwing strange patterns across the wall and floor. "All is ready?" she asked. The Abyssal Dwarf nodded.

"When we start, there are to be no interruptions."

She didn't like his commanding tone, but she nodded her understanding. Now was not the time for such petty arguments. That would come later, he would learn his place or he would die. “We will not be disturbed,” she said.

“Good.”

Hallek-Roi stretched his arm out over the font, his other metal fist reaching underneath to grasp one of the many vent-tubes that ran the length of the Overmaster's arm. The clasp snapped open, steam hissing out like a thousand angry snakes.

“What are you doing?” Dakarshae asked.

“For the summoning to work, a sacrifice of blood must be given.” As he spoke, red fire poured from the metal tube, falling into the ceremonial font in hot droplets. Where it struck it hissed, gathering together into a pool of hot lava. Hallek-Roi tilted his head back, eyes closed as his fire-blood drained into the font. Dakarshae's eyes widened further; she had known the Abyssal Dwarfs worked with fire and heat in their dark towers, but never this. A new respect for the dark Dwarfs filled her as she watched the Overmaster refasten the tube in place. He turned dim eyes to the Priestess.

“Now you.”

Before she could reply, he snatched her arm, dragged it over the font and ripped a long furrow down her forearm, opening up the flesh with a jagged scrap of metal. The blade had been hidden in a small compartment in his armor, something she hadn't considered. The wound gaped like a fleshy mouth as blood began to roll down her arm to drip into the hot fire below. He held her arm in place despite her struggles. She beat at his back with her free hand, her skin blistering quickly against the hot metal of his armor.

“Stop,” she whispered. Already her strength was weakening as her lifeblood continued to pour into the font. It hissed when it landed in the cloying mixture. Hallek-Roi began a low chant, the words thick and harsh to the Twilight Kin's ears. Each one was filled with hate and bile, a gruff litany that the Abyssal Dwarf spat out. Hot spittle

flew with each word to steam on the floor. Still he held her arm, but she could feel his grip loosening. With a sudden movement, she snatched her arm from his grasp, clamping her hand about the wound.

“Are you mad!” she cried.

The Overmaster didn't reply save for another backhanded slap that opened a cut on the Priestesses forehead. She rolled back but didn't fall. Her angry retort stilled in her throat when she saw the eyes of the dark Dwarf boring into her. Gone was the flesh, replaced by something that squirmed and rolled in his head. When he opened his mouth, a wave of heat and steam washed over her. His voice was a guttural cough.

“*Nakkarsha mon-Elic van Raak*,” he cried. A rising wind began to blow, lifting Dakarshae Kae's hair. It blew about her, whipping faster as the wind began to howl. The torch fastened to the wall blew out, throwing the room into temporary darkness, fuelled only by the steady glow from within the ceremonial font. The etchings about the carved obsidian now glowed with a dull warmth as though they were fuelled by the fire within.

A great roar sounded as lightning began to crackle from a point several feet above the font. Blue strands of energy rushed around the pair, causing sparks to explode from where they touched the walls and floor. Dakarshae watched as the Overmaster now began to steadily chant, his voice rising to be heard over the raging wind.

“Come, oh dark lords, so that we may serve you. Grant our request and our devotion is yours. From our blood we give you life, from our sacrifice we give you power. Come to us. Serve us, as we serve you!”

With a powerful crack of thunder, the air split open, knocking the dark pair back as the wind whipped even faster. An explosion of light and sound flooded the chamber, a rushing maelstrom that screamed as a portal of energy expanded. It ripped wider as a creature of nightmare slowly came into being, its many appendages slathering at the widening cleft of energy. Dakarshae, horrified beyond comprehension felt the desire to flee but held her ground,

standing strong as the wind whipped around her. She turned to Hallek-Roi to see his face bathed in the blue glow of energy, his eyes dancing with maniacal glee.

The Lesser Abyssal jumped through the portal to land in the Under-Dungeon chamber. No sooner had it straightened to its full height, the portal gave another scream and snapped shut with a thunderous explosion. The wind fell and all was silent save for the laboured breathing of Dakarshae Kae and the staccato hiss of steam as it vented from the armor of the Overmaster.

The creature towered over them both, its legs powerful muscle as wide as both their bodies together. Its torso was a writhing mass of flesh, twisted and warped. Bone jutted from a dozen tears to wrap about the outside of its form, creating a breastplate of bone so thick no weapon could penetrate it. Where arms should be were thick tentacles that snapped and whipped around itself, coiling like a snake. Each one was puckered, the tips sharp like sword blades. Dakarshae knew a single stroke would slice an opponent open in a heartbeat.

It crouched bringing its head down low. Slowly it turned from Dwarf to Elf, its single eye never blinking. A dozen small mouths opened as one, its voice a multitude of tones. “Speak,” it said, “which one calls me from my rest?”

Hallek-Roi stepped forward. “I do. I bound you here so that you may enlighten your servants with your wisdom and power.”

“I know you,” the Lesser Abyssal declared in a frightening tone, a single tentacle reaching out to point at the Abyssal Dwarf. “You've called me before you many times. Was I not generous enough? Did I not let you live for your arrogance, and yet you test me once more. Stupid creature. Brave... but stupid.”

Dakarshae looked at the Overmaster. What had he done? What had he brought before her, into her very kingdom? The Abyssal Dwarf kept his attention on the Lesser Abyssal, steam venting from the tubes at his neck with increasing regularity.

“I have need of you once more,” he said.

“More twisted creations?” The Lesser Abyssal let out a laugh that made the Priestesses skin crawl. “More beasts of the Abyss to twist to your dark machinations, or is it more than that? You want to yoke my kins strength for your own mortal needs? We have no need for what you offer, and should there ever be anything we desire – we will take it!”

“I have need of you!” Dakarshae stepped forward, her fear gone. “I bind you now, demon of the Abyss.”

Its single eye turned to her. “What would you learn?”

“There is one with power equal to mine. An Elf. I want her.”

The many mouths of the creature of the Abyss all spread wide as its many-voiced laugh filled the chamber. “Power. Fame. Wealth. You mortals are so easy, so predictable, but worry not. I will give you what you seek.”

***

Weepy tendrils of smoke writhed and danced in the cool air of the Under-Dungeon. Dakarshae stared upward; her hands clasped her head, her mouth wide in a silent scream. Her face was bathed in the glow of the magic that swirled around the three figures, each one at a point of the font, their hands linked together, each one wrapped in a slimy tentacle of the Lesser Abyssal.

“Tell me. Tell me everything!” she screamed. A tower of Abyssal fire jetted from the bowl of the font, shooting upwards to strike the ceiling.

“I want to know it all!” The High Priestess shouted into the maelstrom, her hair whipping about madly. Hallek-Roi glanced at her, his eyes filled with a steadily growing fear. *This was madness, beyond all he had known.* He looked over at the grinning visage of the summoned Lesser Abyssal. Its one eye burned, reflecting the madness in the Twilight Kin's face.

It started to unwrap its tentacle from her grip but she clamped her

hand down so hard the long metal spikes on her fingers cut into the slimy flesh. Ichor ran down between her fingers, staining her nails with its putrescence. The creature tried again to remove itself from her grasp but she held on tight.

“More!” she cried. “More!”

Hallek-Roi started to struggle now as he realised what was happening. How? How had she tricked him so easily?

She turned a wicked grin to the Overmaster, nodding to the balcony hidden above them in the dark. “I will not be denied!”

Slowly he turned to look. Standing at the lip of the balcony, their bodies dripping blood from a dozen deep wounds, were the remainder of the Abyssal Dwarf's host. A score of captured Blacksouls, their faces unrecognisable beneath the punishment inflicted on their bodies stepped closer to the edge while behind them a row of Darksome Guard prodded at them with glaives of twisted dark-steel. Their armor had been stripped from them, their weapons taken. Naked and vulnerable, all the Abyssal Dwarfs could do was stand subjugated and hopeless.

“No,” the Overmaster cried. “No!”

Dakarshae Kae raised her head, the long tresses of her hair spilling down her back as she let out a horrible laugh. “Yes,” she cried. “Oh, yes!”

As one the Darksome Guard brought their glaives down in fast, sweeping cuts. Chunks of Abyssal Dwarf flesh fell away as a rain of blood covered the three figures in the chamber below. As the gore-streaked fragments of flesh hit the ceremonial fountain, a roaring cavalcade of energy exploded, twisting around the image of the girls face, its fingers of magic slamming through her face time after time.

The light filled the chamber so suddenly it seemed as though an explosion had occurred. It sent the shadows fleeing into the furthest recess of the Under-Dungeon and broke the dark trinity. They fell back from each other, each crashing to the blood soaked floor. The

Lesser Abyssal made a small gesture with its tentacle, opening up the portal back to the Abyss. With a hiss of annoyance, it stepped through.

A pale blood stained hand grabbed hold of it as Dakarshae tried to keep the creature from fleeing. “I need your power!” she cried.

The creature swatted at her but she clung on. “It's over,” it hissed. With no effort at all, it continued into the portal. Dakarshae hung on, her other hand grasping at a tentacle to try pull it back into the chamber. With a great crackling boom, the portal snapped closed.

Dakarshae screamed and fell back. Blood poured from the stump of her arm where the portal had snapped shut. She collapsed to the ground, her hand releasing the puckered tentacle of the lesser Abyssal. It slithered across the slick floor, coming to rest beside the stunned form of the Overmaster.

As silence and calm settled over the dark dungeon chamber, Hallek-Roi looked from the tentacle to the bloodied stump of the Twilight Priestess.

Slowly, a wicked grin spread across his face.

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In the Under-Dungeon, Dakarshae Kae stared in horror, her one good arm clinging to the ceremonial basin for support. Blood ran from her nose in a crimson stream as she steadied herself. Where her left arm once was, now only a twisted tentacle remained. It whipped about, an angry serpent of Abyssal flesh, fused to her body by the dark magic of Hallek-Roi. The thrice cursed Dwarf had fled before she'd woken, leaving her with his abomination of a gift.

But there was a sick bonus to the mutated appendage that even now writhed and twisted with a life of its own. Infused within its sickly flesh was the knowledge of the Lesser Abyssal. She had wanted to learn the secrets of the Abyss and now she had more.

So much more.

The Necromancer

by Patrick McCabe

Aodhan flashed a devilishly handsome smile as he watched the armies clash from his vantage point on Saint's Hill, his warriors were glorious, shambling, clumsy and certainly lacking in hygiene, but they were getting the job done and he hadn't even had to move. He couldn't ask for more.

“Master, if I may interject?” Einarr, irritating at the best of times. Aodhan's pet necromancer certainly had his uses, sadly though his wise counsel normally involved something soul destroyingly boring and rarely meshed entirely with the vampire's wishes.

“What is it now Einarr?” Aodhan rasped, allowing his fangs to show.

Einarr made a show of flinching in terror before calmly continuing. Aodhan recognised the gesture and pouted.

“The wisdom in letting your horde overwhelm Bjartr Bloodbeard is undeniable, but perhaps an example should be made? Perhaps you could brutally eviscerate him and parade his remains in front of his followers, or cut his head off and swish your hair about in his fountaining blood and let the survivors spread tales of of your savagery?”

“That's a ridiculous idea! There's all together too many dwarfs down there for that!” Aodhan scowled, the necromancer was ridiculous and his ideas were equally so, lords of undeath and destruction didn't do their own dirty work, that's what minions were for.

“There's not so many master, your sire, she-” Aodhan covered the withered old necromancer's mouth with one taloned hand.

“My sire isn't here is she? She's off... galavanting and... getting up to shenanigans! While I sit here on a muddy hill in a muddy field Watching dwarfs get killed. Which I must say is an awfully good idea, better than say, oh I don't know, running down there and getting cannoned in the face don't you think Einus?” Aodhan

chuckled at that. “Einus. Einus! You should change your name to that.”

“I will take it into consideration master. But if I may say, our mistress would be most pleased to hear tales of how you personally drank the old dwarf dry in front of his men... remember when you did the elf hero in?”

Aodhan grinned, he did remember, he remembered very well. His mistress had been very pleased, very pleased indeed because she normally refused to do *that*.

“Yes but that was an accident Einarr, I didn't realise he was a damned hero or that his family was watching from up that tree.. what is it with elves and trees anyway, I don't get it, nature is full of bugs and it smells vile.”

“Master, please keep your mind on the task at hand!” The old wizard pleaded, suddenly looking centuries older.

“Fine! But she had better be grateful Einarr or I'll make a new pair of boots from your back!”

“Oh she will! She will!” Einarr practically laughed with relief, watching thankfully as Aodhan sprinted down the hill into the melee, the youngster was lazy and mostly stupid, really he had very little to redeem him. Einarr felt very, very old and hoped that once Aodhan had gotten himself killed, his mistress would choose a more suitable man to serve as her warlord.

A Lesson Learned

by Michael Grey

Khelek-hel
Khelek-hel (ice elf)

The wood in the fire cracked. Each spit cast shadows of those seated, instantly doubling the audience before fading just as quickly. Beyond the group the light of the fire was lost into the night, swallowed by the rolling hills of the Ardovikian Plains and the deep, cloudless sky. If any of those around the fire noticed, they may have appreciated the irony of the lost light as they soaked in the words and experiences of the other Plains folk around them.

They had told their stories, each chosen and imparted for their own reason. Some wished to gain understanding of their actions, inviting interpretation, some shared their experiences so old mistakes would not be made by others. A young warrior sought knowledge of the foul *droren-dweorgas* to aid in his pursuit of their extermination. One told of his travels through far off lands, of fetid swamps filled with the half breeds of men and home to a dragon of legendary size.

But all were there to learn from the one yet to speak.

There were many shaman of great age that the young of the folk would consider an honour to attend, but few whose deeds were told of around all the campfires of Mantica in such respected tones. The fire around which the visitors were gathered was the camp of one such shaman, and they knew simply being there would be a worthy tale in itself. Eight heads leaned in slightly, the better to hear the one they travelled days and weeks to see.

Another log in the fire spat, illuminating an erect figure and a face lined with years. The old shaman sat the furthest from the flames, though by dint of age his rightful place was the choicest position in the warmth. He blinked once at the fire, apparently oblivious to the patient stares. Then in a surprisingly strong voice he said, "I have heard tales tonight. Good tales, strong tales of adventures both brave and perilous. I am pleased that our people's' future is

assured by such fearless warriors, but exuberance and bravery are nothing without the wisdom to direct it. Each of these tales speaks to me of courage, which is good and right, but it is bravery for the sake of glory, and such a goal is dangerous. Glory is fleeting, and once gone leaves a youngling hungry for more. Those who seek it would fight their own ancestors for glory but, for glory alone.

"My own tale began like many of yours; leaving to find my Spirit among the world. Sixteen summers old I was when I left our home in the East for the first time. The time of my spirit quest was not auspicious. The previous summer had seen a drought that left our winter stores meagre and the following spring arrived early, ripening fruit before it could be gathered. So I was to leave our home with only the eyes of my sire and grandsire at my back, and the rest of my camp foraging for the winter ahead.

"I travelled far in what remained of that summer. I feel there is not a corner of the Plains that has not felt the tread of my foot nor any pinnacle in the Dragon's Teeth that I have did not dream on, but it was within the ancient forests of Galahir where my life began to take purpose.

"Summer had waned and autumn had firmly grasped the forest around me. The last of the summer's fruits had long rotted on the vine or been picked by the animals of the southern forests, and so I was left to hunt for the mushrooms of Galahir. It was on one of these forages that I almost fell across a khelek-hel, huddled in the arms of an exposed oak tree root." The shaman chuckled, "I see your faces. There are some senses that shadows do not dull. Yes, I surprised a shadow-melded elf. At the time it would have been the proudest boast of my young life, outwitting an elf in their element, but I would be disillusioning myself. No prepared elf, even one of their ice-kin as far from her frozen home as she was, would allow themselves to be taken by surprise. She was a druid, on her own Spirit Quest. I sense your surprise. Some of the elves are not so different from us. The Green Dam recognises no borders and does not care for the trivial rivalries between the races, and here was one of our own sisters, alone and very much in need. The elves are longer lived than us, and our clans allow us to undertake our Spirit Quests at a mere sixteen summers, but this elf had waited many hundreds more for the same honour."

The shaman paused for a moment and leaned away from the fire before continuing, “Consider this for a moment - we send tens of young out into the world each summer on their Spirit Quests to become the men and women who will lead our people for another generation, and with each return our clans are blessed and swell. But, the elves send a dozen on similar journeys within one of our lifetimes. And consider again; not each quest is successful. For us a failed return is a tragedy to be mourned, but for them it is nothing short of the ending of another sliver of hope for their race. It was the pressure of failing such hope that compelled her to seek help for her quest.

"She had sought her Spirit within the deeps of the sunken city of Genola, lost beneath the waves at the end of Winter. The same ruins that have claimed the lives of many of our own brothers and sisters. She told me she believed her Spirit was to be found among the monsters of those caverns and how renown would be gained for her house when she returned from those infamous deeps, and also how she was afraid she would not be strong enough to face those creatures alone for centuries to come. And so she sought help from one of her family. The prospect of glory for their name was enough for the two elves to both enter the caverns, but not for both to leave.

"Something had befallen them in the depths, and though she had escaped with her life she would not tell me of it. And now her kin remained within the ruins, but she either could not or would not brave those depths again. I wasn't to know if the elf had survived, but I could see that unless someone sought him out the matter would be moot, so I hauled my shield and mace, and called on my ancestors for strength as I set towards the strand.

"It was night, but a bright moon and cloudless sky showed me the way from the forest to the open beach where old-remembered tales from my grand sire told me I would find the caverns' entrance. Glints of moonlight shone dully from fallen architecture as I left the cover of the forest and neared the ancient coastline and the finfolk who more recently claimed them as their own. Picking my way through the moss-covered stones, I used the shadows of long-ruined arches and the way of the fox to remain unseen from the denizens of the strand until I at last stood above the final descent into Genola.

"I paused there over the first step. I willed my feet to take the stair, but something in my soul bade me stop. Again I tried lower myself, but for the brief moment I was struck by doubt and, I was loath to admit it, fear. After all, no one knew where I was. I could turn back now. In my travels across Galahir I felt no thread and heard no call from my Spirit, and as it surely lay elsewhere, leaving this place to quicken my search would bring no dishonour. And to the fore of these thoughts was that I was aiding a member of a race who had more often than not found itself against our people, who in the past considered us no more than beasts! And yet, even knowing this, I forced myself onto that step and walked into those dank shadows.

"You've all heard tales of those deeps as children, of the grindylow of exceptional size and ferocity, of the cunning finfolk who hunt those caves in packs. I will tell you now; those tales do not lie. What compelled these creatures to group in such large numbers I do not know, but I knew on my own I could not hope to defeat them all.

"I had not gone far before I was first attacked. Three of the grindylow sought to ambush me from a hidden cave, launching themselves at me with their guttural war cries. The first was effortlessly dispatched; their mad headlong rush brought it within striking distance and it met the full force of my mace with its forehead as it brought a crude spear to bear on my chest. The swift death of the first cautioned the other two. They divided their efforts and one began to circle me while his companion made false lunges with a hissing menace. Such a basic attack is easily defended. The circling grindylow announced his attack with a cry, allowing me to raise my shield. Like the first, animal instinct to overwhelm its prey with speed caused it to reach within arms length as I brought my shield up and pushed forward with all my weight. The heavy iron shield boss crushed the creature's translucent eye, stunning it immediately and I wheeled around to meet the third. Again the creature acted in its nature and threw itself forward. Still spinning on one foot, I wheeled my mace in an upwards arc, catching my opponent underneath its chin and driving the blunt end of my weapon through the roof of its mouth and into its brain. The wounded grindylow was on its knees, blindly bubbling in its language. It was a kindness to put it out of its

suffering.

“This was the first of many encounters and I will not tell you of all the tricks I used to sneak by those I could, or how I faced those I could not. Such a tale would take many nights, instead I will tell you of when I found what I was looking for.

"I travelled further down those tunnels than I thought was possible. The salt water dripping down the walls and pooling around my ankles suggested I was some way below the ocean’s surface. It was in one of those pools that I saw the elf body. I had slowly rounded a corner into a large cavern, far larger than that of the Great Hall at Raven’s Scar, and had picked my way through the pools by the low glow of the phosphoric lichen. It was this lichen that illuminated the floor of the cavern and seemed to highlight the body slumped in its centre. Seeing no movement I crept to the fallen elf. If I had the wisdom I have now I may have questioned how that body, alien and unwelcomed in those caves, had fallen so neatly in the glow of that fungus. Instead I simply approached the elf and bent to rouse him when a movement caught my attention.

"I stopped where I was and slowly turned my head. As my eyes rested on the shadows a shape became more distinct; what before were stalagmites were now legs, the rock shelf above, a head.There, deep in the shadows, was a grindylow my height and half again. The creature was gently heaving as it breathed in the moist air of the cavern, what I had taken for the natural flow of air in the cavern. Another huge intake of breath and its expanding chest revealed a hulk of muscle around its bulbous body. I had faced many of these creatures on my journey downwards, but none nearly this large. Before me was one of their kind nearly as large as a mammoth. I now knew what happened to the two elves as they made their way through these caves, and was struck by the thought that both of them together were of no match for this beast, and I stood in its lair alone.

"I froze where I stood. That it would have seen me was undoubted, yet it hadn’t reacted to my presence. I slowly straightened and still received no recognition from it. Perhaps the creature’s inherent bloodlust had been sated by its attack on the elves?

"It was then the beast exploded forward in a frenzy of movement In an instant it cleared the space between us and was upon me. By chance my shield arm was to my front and surely saved my life as the beast leapt. Its clawed foot scraped down and splintered the wooden surface as its weight bore me back and down.

"The shocking violence of the attack left me stunned and on my back. The creature aimed blow after vicious blow to my head that I could barely block with my free arm. Its weight was enormous, and as my shield was inexorably pushed further into my chest, breaths became harder to take. Already my thoughts were hazy and reactions slower and it would be just moments before those cruel talons raked my face. I saw the swing of those clawed hands as if they moved through tar, slowly arcing towards my head to be feebly batted away by my mace.

"It was as my consciousness ebbed away that I felt the Lady. The eldest shaman or druid feels that touch once, perhaps twice in their life. That was my time. As I lay with my back forced against the wet cavern floor I sensed the presence of the eyeless fish shoals thriving in the dark, the life of the glowing fungus all around me, an ancient, searching tree root from the forest above and the subtle tendrils that link us all. Those tendrils I was able to pull from their sources, through my body and to my will. My eyes rolled back in my skull as I chanted my wishes to the Lady. The creature arched its arm backwards and pushed itself further over my shield to deliver its final blow as my chant completed. I dropped my mace and thrust my hand forward to grab the monster's face and announced the final word.

"For the briefest of moments nothing happened. Then I saw my hand in silhouette as a light as bright as lightning flashed from my palm. My lungs nearly burst as the bolt jolted the monster bodily from me and out of sight beyond my shield. I heard it land heavily some distance away. Scrambling to my feet, I was about to reach for my weapon when I saw the smoke rising from the dead eye sockets. For a few tense moments I watched the grindylow's steaming body jerk. The spell had drained me to my soul, and if the creature was to attack again it would have to be soon before my body also tired and left me completely helpless. My eyes didn't blink as for what seemed like an age I looked for a sign of hostility until the creature's body ceased convulsing. When no sign was

forthcoming I made to the elf. I did not need to inspect it to know it was too late, he had already gone to whatever place their people consider holy. There was nothing I could do for him. I was either too late or he was dead before I even reached the caverns, but mourning a life I never knew would achieve nothing. Exhausted as I was I could not hope to recover his body. Instead I plucked an ornate brooch from his cloak, picked up my mace and wearily made my way to the surface. The other denizens of those caves must have felt the demise of the monster for I left there unmolested and without seeing another living being.

"The elf remained where I found her, still hugging her legs in the bole of the same oak tree. There was nothing more I could do for that poor girl. Saying I was sorry was scant recompense for losing a loved one, but that was all I had. I pressed the brooch of her lost cousin into her unresisting hand, said a prayer to the Lady to protect the elf's Spirit on its final journey, and left."

The elder paused and looked deep into the fire, perhaps seeing his younger self again striding through the Galahir forest. The young warriors gathered leaned in in silence, each knowing they were privileged to hear such a tale and not wanting to disturb the elder's thoughts.

Eventually the old shaman took in a deep breath, taking his eyes from the fire and fixing his gaze on each of them in turn. "That was the first time I came close to losing my life. It was not for me, it was not for glory, it was because it was the right thing to do. That was many years ago and I have risked myself since on more occasions since than I can remember. But, on each of those times, I thought back to that elf and remember the lesson I learned that day; if you risk all, be sure that that which you are risking it for is worth of the gamble. Is self glory, the most intangible and fleeting of things, worthy?"

His piece said, the elder rose with the aid of a staff and returned to his tent, leaving the others to stare at the fire as its light shone into the night.

For more stories like this, visit Michael's blog at
www.michaelgrey.com.au

The Haunting Promise

by Kenny Moncrieff

Her reflection in the wine made Velna realise just how she had become. Her long dark hair was loose, her face was grim as a dwarf and her eyes were like that of a daemon.

“So what is the reason you summoned me?”

Velna patiently lifted her head up to the other Twilight Kin opposite to her of the dining table. He was bigger than their kind in more than one way, especially with his overbearing armor.

“Yes. I wanted to inform you lord Helm that I’ll be seizing control of your forces.”

“My forces? You mean my entire army?” chuckled Helm. “And what makes you think I’m handing it over?”

“Because I’ll be inheriting it.”

The elf’s eyes squinted. “I had no idea you were into jokes Velna. I always understood you were as dull as the breeze and yet just as refreshing.” Helm cocked his head. “How about you become one of my wives then we can talk about inheritance.”

“No need.”

“Hmp. Okay then, how about explaining to me how is it that you’ll be inheriting my army? I have five children, two wives and over a dozen cousins?”

Velna rested her chin on her wrists. “I’ll inherit your army, because once you're dead, the general is the older brother of mine. So he’ll merge with my army in hopes of seizing command. Many in your soldiers won’t oppose this unless they want to be passed onto another member of your family. However the problem is that you were the only one competent in your family. Nearly everyone, including your wives have been nothing but ingrate sloths or have the brains of trolls that without you, many of them would be dead

or on the streets. Your cousins and sons could merge their armies of course to make yours assimilate by force, but three of your cousins are at bitter war with each other, one your sons is far too lazy and the rest will be too afraid. Therefore there is no obstacle to stop me from taking what was once yours."

The lord looked a lot smaller with that dumb look on his face. "Th-that's of course if I'm dead."

"But you are dead. You drank the 'moments of undeath' poison. Your entire body is numb which is why your brains failing to register that no blood is being pumped..."

Helm dropped his cup and seemed to have spotted the black splodges in the wine. "B-but your family has always had a tradition of never harming their guests."

"You actually believe that. My family has always been deceitful scum that has never cared what others think of them, so long as we have power."

"B-but-."

"I really did think you'd be more challenge Helm. In fact I was concerned that there'd be war and I'd be crushed. Risky I know, but I really do need your army. It's strange however that the once great Lord Helm was brought down by trusting another Twilight Kin. Probably-." Helm banged against the table. "How rude. He died before I could finish."

"Maybe couldn't take any more of your blathering," snickered Maegar Gilfer. "Probably what really killed him."

"Then why are you still alive?"

"Does it matter?" asked Isen Starslayer. The brooding Twilight leaned over the table. "I think everyone will know your family's so-called tradition is now nothing but a tale."

"If we weren't so good at covering up Isen, we wouldn't have a so-called family tradition."

“Hmp, the fact that your family is steeped in lies and deceit wonders how I can trust you.”

Velna snatched Isen off his feet, onto her laps and pressed her lips against him. When she was finished, she gazed at his stunned face. “That is why.” Isen was a greedy slime that took what was being dangled over him. The idea he had a chance of marrying her, gave him dreams of sharing her vast power.

Maegar snickered.

“Wh-what are you laughing at!” shouted Isen.

“Your face!”

Velna threw Isen off him and he crashed into the plates making Maegar laugh louder. The kin was unpredictable and irritating, but his lack of ambition and relying on others was what made Velna able to trust him.

Isen thumped against the table frustrated. “At least I have more than half a face you scum!” Maegar kept laughing.

Maegar use to be the heir of a powerful lord, but a nasty accident with some apparent soup had melted half his face off. A slave in the knowledge of healing saved him in hopes of a reward. But the first thing Maegar did once he found his life was ruined was maul the healer. He was soon exiled by his family for a very suspicious reason.

These two were the closest trustful retinue she could find, at the moment.

“Lady Velna,” said a messenger. He glanced at the body.

“Speak.”

“The admiral has regrettably withdrawn from the expedition.”

Velna leered. “Why?”

“He would not explain.”

“Quite a dilemma,” said Isen. “We’ll look weak if Admiral Ritrek leaves our forces.”

And no one made Velna look weak. She got up. “Where is admiral Ritrek.”

“At the Heartgutted Inn my lady.”

“Thank you.”

The messenger immediately left.

“Maegar, I want that messenger killed if you will.”

“As you command my lady.”

“Isen, stay here and clean up, I’ll deal with Admiral Ritrek on my own.”

“Why did you want someone like that as the head of our fleet? He is an oaf of a Twilight Kin that made the rank of admiral by luck.”

“Because admirals ask questions before they are willing sail a ship. Ritrek is too desperate to be asking questions and I’ll remind him of that.”

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Velna entered the dank inn of Heartgutted. There were kin slumped over tables and floors, perhaps dead. Others were having slurred conversations. Some also eyed her. Velna just walked pass them. She was in her family armor; a lowborn kin had some wits not to touch her, no matter how drunk.

“Hey, if it isn’t Lady Velna!” yelled someone. At a table sat a kin more dwarf than a proper elf. He had a long musty beard, stout body and hardened flesh. Only thing that drove him apart from a dwarf was his height, pointy ears and spiteful jealous eyes. “Here

for me are you! Come have a seat!" He then bolstered. "Let's talk about how I'm stepping off this voyage!"

Velna slid beside him and gazed. The kin stuck out his chest and raised his chin. He then puffed out laughter.

"Sorry, I find it amusing you actually came to this place. A lord or lady wouldn't be caught half dead coming here. They'd normally sic their dogs to get what they wanted. Especially the inn's beer, it's pretty good, want some?" He held his tankard out to her. "Oh? Are you upset that Admiral Ritrek's left your crew? Shouldn't be surprised. This army, this really huge army, the fleet and yet you couldn't get a captain better than me. There's a whole lot of fancy admirals you could've gotten, yet you got me to be the head of your fleet. Well that could only mean you couldn't get any other admiral and you know what that tells me. You're not getting me either. Got anything to say? Well? Say something?"

Words would only have caused more problems. Velna slugged Ritrek and he hit the floor. She stamped on him and strung his head up by the hair.

"I don't have time for you to be fooling around Ritrek. I have expedition almost ready and I don't want you to interfere any more than you already are." She touched his face. "And to remind you that I don't allow games." She slashed him.

Velna then left. She drifted back into the streets and walked amongst its slums. Not much could be said for the lowborn kin home. It had more light than anywhere else, but that was a bad thing. The Twilight Kin had become more accustomed to the dark and the abyssal gods favoured the dark, so darkness was treated as a commodity. Velna already felt discomforted by the tinge of light.

"Good evening Lady Velna Bloodrain."

Sauntering out from the shadows was a scantily robed woman with jewellery and wielding a nightmarish staff.

"High Priestess Loverit Deathmaker."

The priestess smiled as innocent as a feline. “Taking a stroll through the dark streets? Highborn don’t last long here.”

“I wasn’t planning on staying long. Now what do I owe the pleasures?”

“Oh, so demanding as ever Lady Velna. Could I just call you Velna? You’ve never been much of a lady.”

“You’d watch your tongue, Loverit.”

The priestess cocked her head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound mean. How about I just get back to your question? I want to ask if I can join your expedition.”

“No.”

“Oh don’t say that. You’ll make me upset.”

“You heard my answer now be gone.”

Velna moved away, but an imp creature jumped in her way grinning joyfully.

“But your answer isn’t what I wanted it to be.”

The Lady glared.

“Don’t give me that look. It’s rude.”

“Then get your pet out of my way before I step on it.”

“Sigh, there’s just no helping you Velna.”

“Why do you want to come on my expedition?”

“Becomes I’m interested. Most the high priestess are. But I’m the only one willing to jump in on this voyage and find out just what is your purpose. So deny me, the other high priestess will want to come aboard as well.”

Loverit was right. There was not much Velna could do if she turned away one of their own kind. It would only starve the cult's curiosity. "Fine." Velna stormed off.

"Okay, see you on the voyage!" shouted Loverit waving.

A Tale of Dwarves and Orcs

by Neil Jones

Gunthersson

"I say, you there, little chap - come here"

Gunther Gunthersson sighed inwardly and turned to face the haughty voice coming from the fine goods section of Ol' Gunther's Emporium.

"Yes, sirs, how may I be of assistance?" he asked wearily of the two foppish young men.

"Well, I suppose you may be a little bit of a help - aha a little bit, what? Did you hear that Roderick? I said 'little bit', and look at him!" called one of the humans.

"Oh, hawhaw, I say, you rapier wit," replied the second.

Gunther could feel a bristly heat under his beard. His dear old dad's voice was as clear in his head as if he had still been alive and stood at Gunther's shoulder: 'Always remember son, humans insult without meaning; Be as tolerant as you would for a youngster'.

"Shorty, how much for this bit of bric a brac?" asked the young noble Roderick

"Ahaw" added the other, clearly amused by the continuation of the height related humour.

"That, young sir," said Gunther, his tone a pitch higher as he forced his anger at the new insult into his stomach "is not bric a brac, but a brooch made of silver and mithril, mined in the depth of the Grundil range, and fashioned by the finest Smith House West of the mountains. It's value is at least thirty dragons"

"What? Whatwhat? Thirty! I know you garden gnomes are greedy, but that is an outrage. Trying to short change us, eh?" cried Roderick, in amused outrage.

"Short change! Ahaha." added his companion.

'In the mode of competitive commerce, we must never resort to prideful violence' came his father's voice in Gunther's head, as he forced his clenched hands open. "I'm afraid the cost is 30 Dragons, sirs. I do have some cheaper brooches, if you care?" he asked flatly.

"More affordable? Do I look like I would struggle to raise the funds, you revolting grubber? Impudence, I call it, what?"

"Perhaps, Roderick, he has a SHORT temper ahahahaw!"

Grubber. The word burned in Gunther's head. Rage fired in his heart and his nostrils flared. "Perhaps, I can show you some of our most special wares, sirs?" he as he led them toward the 'Arms and Armour' section. He couldn't remember his dad ever saying 'be true to yourself' or 'business isn't everything', but he couldn't be sure he didn't.

"That's more like it, knee-biter!" crowed Roderick.

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The New Kingdoms of the Ardovikian Plain cared little for the civilised veneer of tolerance practiced in the old Successor Kingdoms or the Hegemony. Dwarf and Man may rub along, cheek by jowl, in Basilea, but out here a man was a man, and not afraid to call a grubber a dirty, earth-sucking grubber.

The Dukedom of Estorium was no different. Of course Dwarves were allowed within the city walls, but best they didn't show their faces in the more affluent neighbourhoods, or, conversely, the less salubrious taverns. And, of course, nobody wanted to see the dirty devils sneaking around after dark, no doubt using their Abyss-spawned night vision to spy on the girls and women of the town in their bed-chambers.

The Dukedom's small Dwarven population kept their heads down, sticking to the trades, such as general shop-keeping and money-lending generally despised by the humans. Things, however, got

decidedly worse when in an apparent random act of carnage a young Dwarf trader, Gunthersson, killed two offspring of two off the Dukedom's noble class, before disappearing into the hills, eluding the posse mounted men-at-arms sent to hunt him down. The bodies of the young men, bludgeoned almost beyond recognition by a hammer or mace, outraged the people of Estorium.

Rumours of Dwarvish worship of the Abyss, of human children abducted and murdered in gruesome rites, of poisoning, of barn burning and all manner of dark deeds were legion. In righteous self-defence mobs rampaged through The Dwarf quarter on more than one occasion. Rather than reign in the mobs, the Duke levied new taxes on the bearded folk, introduced identification papers which Dwarves had to present upon demand, and began a wave of arrests, looking for Gunthersson's co-conspirators or other Dwarven degenerates.

Some Dwarves, remembering past waves of persecution, kept their heads down, waiting for blood to cool. Others fled to other New Kingdoms, leaving their little wealth behind - hoping to find persecution at least a little less vile. Others still whispered of Gunthersson, or of the mighty Golloch, at whose feet humans - even Basilea itself - trembled. They whispered of salvation, of vengeance.

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Grez'atheskia

According to Elves, Orcs were a bastard race, born from foul experimentation in the dark of the Abyss. According to men, they were creatures of dim wit, living short and brutish lives. According to Theodousious of Baselia, orcs 'have the life expectancy of a common horse, perhaps eight to twelve years. These short years are filled with none of the industry of the domesticated horse, as the *Orcus Maximus* tends toward sloth and squalor. Orcs do not have the capacity for abstract thought, lacking in key brain development of the higher races'. Grez'atheskia would, given the opportunity, beg to differ.

Grez'atheskia was a very old Orc. His skin was so dark it was

almost black, like ivy at night. He knew that Orcs did indeed, for the most part, live short and brutish lives on the fringes of the Ardovikian Plain. How could it be any different, forced from the lush, flatlands, once teeming with game, to exists on the margins - in barren scrub, and cold, windswept hills? Violence was a necessity when fighting over the scraps - starvation never more than a winter away. Orc lives were cheap to the petty 'kings' and 'princes' whose territories warred across the plains - Orc mercenaries needed paying little more than food and trinkets. Grez'atheskia, in what seemed like a world away, had fought as one such mercenary, his 'guttural' name unpronounceable to his masters and called simply 'Grez' amongst other epithets. When he thought of that time, he could almost taste the rancid bovine flesh they fed him. Bitter bile rose in his throat.

When the fighting was done, they had lots of ways of disposing of their unwanted greenskins. The Elves of Galahir made a sport of it - an annual 'hunt', where heroic young elves, mounted upon savage chargers, ornately armed and armored, rode down any orc they could find, whole families and even clans slaughtered, down to the smallest Orcling. Their bloodied bodies paraded through the glades to celebration and feasting. Human kinglings 'made war' on orcs. Serried ranks of knights and men at arms pursuing Orc clans in unequal struggles - one side aiming for glory and the other for the elusive goal of survival. Manlings brought up on a diet of tales of heroism and Orcish depravity. Through the decades, Orcs were driven entirely from the central plains, into the Dragon's Teeth Mountains, toward the steppes or toward the brutal slavery of the Abyss. They became a story to scare the ignorant, remaining only in tavern names and the like - 'the Orc's Head', 'the Bloody Nest' and the like. Few remembered the origins of these names. Very few. Indeed, perhaps Grez'atheskia was unique in this regard.

Some winters Grez'atheskia left his kin in their hunger and squalor, warring over the pathetic hunting grounds that were available to them and travelled his old tribal lands across the plains. He travelled at night, to avoid contact with 'civilized' folk, and spent the days hidden among woods, old quarries or caves - wherever he could avoid detection. True enough, trappers or shepherds sometimes found him, but his old arms still held strength enough to quickly end these unplanned encounters, and whilst these encounters brought him little joy, they did, at least, bring

sustenance.

Grez'atheskia had almost had one such encounter earlier that evening. As he clambered over a vines, toward a small cave - once a shamanic shrine for his clan which he remembered well from both his youth and previous walkabouts, he heard voices from within. He readied himself, calmly unhooking both his axes, feeling the familiar leather of their well-worn handles, preparing to rush into the cave to dispatch the interlopers. As he stepped toward the crevice, his bare foot brushed something smooth and cool. He looked down through the gloom and saw, to his amazement, a fine warhammer shining in the speckled moonlight. He silently put down one of his axes and picked up the weapon.

He marveled at the beauty of the overlaid intricate swirls of gold and brass over the central section. He studied the perfect balance of the axe on one side of the head and the hammer on the other. The moonlight caught a darker substance on the hammerhead, and Grez'atheskia instinctively brought it to his mouth, his tongue darting to taste... Man blood. He paused, looking toward the cave, overwhelmed by his fortune - a weapon of this quality in the hands of an orc? Once, perhaps, in times long since passed. He approached, not now with the murderous intent of moments before, and could now make out not two voices as he had assumed, but only one. A voice, speaking common tongue, high pitched and feverish. The tone immediately reminded Grez'atheskia of the shamans who led his people in his youth through visions borne of hallucinogens.

"I'm so sorry dad, I didn't mean to do it, I'm not a killer, I never hurt anyone before, but they kept laughing at me dad, at us, dad, at all of us, dad, like they are better than us, like we aren't good enough to even exist.."

Not good enough to even exist. Grez'atheskia pictured burning huts, starving orclings, elves cavorting around mounds of dead orcs, man fields and farms where young orcs once raced and wrestled.

"... I didn't mean to do it dad, but how much are we meant to put up with, how many insults? How much do we have to suffer, dad? What gives them the right? We were here first, but they think they

own the whole of Mantica, well that's not right, it's not right I tell you.."

How much suffering was enough, Grez'atheskia wondered in the darkness.

"... I mean, all I want is a chance to live, to breath, to hold my head up high. Well off the damned ground at least!"

Grez'atheskia subconsciously raised his head, standing straighter than he had in years.

".. They mock us, they take what's ours, they call themselves 'Duke' and 'Prince'! Well I couldn't take it anymore. I'm glad I killed them, dad, I'd kill them again, the rich arrogant scum. They deserved to die, they all deserve to die.. "

Grez'atheskia knew spiritual guidance when he heard it. Of course all the real shaman were long since dead, so it must be the soul of a great shaman communicating with him. With him! He felt pride, for the first time in so long that it was like feeling the emotion as a orcling with his first kill, able to feed his family.

"... Our people should get together and bring their damned palaces and castles down, we should burn them and make men bow and scrape for a change, they might have the numbers but we have the right..."

Though enthralled, Grez'atheskia's senses were not deaf to the clopping of hooves and rattle of armor clanking through the woods. He lifted his snout, and breathed in the odor of man flesh. Come, no doubt, to defile the holy place and destroy the wondrous salvation it seemed to offer. Rage descended.

A woodsman rounded the tree, speaking over his shoulder, "I'm telling you lads, I heard funny noises from this old cave, and if it is that psycho dwarf I want the reward, just over here it is..", his sentence stopping suddenly as the orc axe in Grez'atheskia's left hand shattered his skull. A man-at-arms, leading his horse through the trees, focusing on his iron clad boot's battle with the undergrowth, felt a warm splatter across his face. He looked up,

barely comprehending as the woodman guide's body fell back toward him, a dark mass cannoning toward him. As he reached toward his sheathed sword, he began to scream. The scream died with its owner as a perfectly balanced warhammer smashed through his iron-rimmed helmet. The dead man's horse reared in panic, causing the other men's horses to shy. As each man fought their horse and their confused fear, their eyes and ears sought to make sense of what was happening. A blood-curdling, inhuman roar, men shouting and screaming, horses rearing. Toward the back of the troop, a middle aged man-at-arms shouted to another, his nephew, "Sod this, Sam, feckin' run, lad!", and terrified men fled into the night.

Grez'atheskia stood alone in the clearing. Blood, man and horse, covered his face, his arms, his torso. His chest heaved with adrenaline. Amongst the death, he felt as alive as he had in his entire life. Men running in terror from a lone orc, screaming like orclings as they ran! The power of the mystical words were evidenced all around him. "I'm glad I killed them" he echoed "they all deserve to die". He paused, cleaving the chest of a dying man, and seeking its heart from the mess within, cutting it out with the practiced butchery of a hunter. "Our people should get together. We should burn them" he intoned, seeking to commit the words to memory, and sank his teeth into man flesh in a offering to the old gods. It was time to bring the old ways back to his people. It was time to hunt on the plains once more. And it was time to bring his people home.

The Duke

The Duke of Estoria, Edward III, was not known as a patient man. Those amongst his closest advisors who knew him best could see the reddening of his jowls and the drawing down of his heavy brow, and edged noiselessly from the Ducal dais. Lord Swan seemed completely unaware of the impending storm as he all but berated his liege lord.

"My poor Roderick has been dead in the cold ground for two whole weeks, and what justice do I get, my Duke? I'll tell you - None! My second born son brutally slain, and what action is taken? A few sweeps of the surrounding countryside by the men-at-arms, a few damned grubbers roughed up and that's your lot, Swan old boy! I

don't ruddy think so! You think it just me who is mocked by this travesty? I doubt there is a liege lord on the entire bally Eastern Ardorkiva who hasn't heard of the Dukedom's feebleness in the face of violent rebellion..."

"ENOUGH!" Bellowed the Duke, "Enough whining, you damned fool! Were it not for the loss of your son, and the fact that more deaths amongst the nobility may further excite the populace, I'd have you taken to the courtyard and beheaded RIGHT BALLY NOW! Enough, Swan - ENOUGH!" Courtiers, with some amusement, would later recount how Lord Swan momentarily looked as if his face had been bashed with the same blunt instrument that had done for his son.

"Of course, my Duke, absolutely, that is to say...I, I.."

"STOP YOUR WRETCHED BLATHERING THIS VERY INSTANT!" Screamed the Duke.

Silence reigned in the Ducal Great Hall. No one spoke, some held even their breath. The Duke's eyes were closed tight. His knuckles white upon the arms of his great chair. He breathed and waited for the red blotches of rage to clear from before him. The Duke had a violent disposition. His father had before him, and his father before him, stretching back to the first Duke of Estorium. Being a furious killing beast had been pretty much a prerequisite for the early Dukes, as they carved the Dukedom in blood, smashing the wild Western Clans, driving out Orcs and their kin.

Due to the stagnant gene pool that was the noble elite in Eastern Ardovikia, these early traits of the murderers, rapists and sadists who built the foundations of the modern polity persisted. Whilst useful for waging unremitting war on green-skinned savages, Duke Edward was keenly aware of the limitations of such traits when running a modern mercantile city state in what was becoming a rather wealthy and really quite pleasant corner of man's dominion. In his head he reached 'ten', and feeling his rage not fully subsided, began the slow count again.

"My dear Swan" began the Duke at last, allowing one or two of the less experienced courtiers to noisily draw the breath they had rashly

held when silence reigned, "I have taken every single appropriate and desirable step to attain justice for poor Roderick and young Galahad. I have dispatched our men-at-arms on a regular rota, searching for the monster Gunthersson and whatever grubber bandits he has in his foul company. Even now, a regiment of my very best mounted Men-at-Arms are scouring the Rotten Corpse Woods, following up on a recent lead"

Funny, the names of some of the places round here, the Duke mused, as he continued to list the steps he had taken "I have insisted that every grubber carries identity papers, so we can controls their movements. In addition at this very moment my brother, Lord Richard, is interrogating a number of suspicious grubbers found without papers or out after dark." Best of all, he left unsaid, I am using the opportunity the 'tax' the blighters like billy-o! The planned East Wing of the Ducal Hall would be a lasting testament to his beneficent rule.

"It could well be, Swan, that either my brother has extracted vital information - or better yet our regiment of brave Men at Arms will bring the murderous grubber, shackled and on his knees, to our justice this very afternoon!" The Duke was all too aware, of course, that his brother's 'interrogations' would provide little information. It was hard for even the most well motivated grubber to say much of value with their tongues removed. The Duke was, in fact, a little relieved that the current Dwarf problem had given his brother a, if not useful, the. At least acceptable use for his... vices.

Of course, sharing the same blood as the Duke himself, it was inevitable Lord Richard would not be entirely like lesser men, but the Duke had always been aware that his brother took a little too much pleasure in their darker nature. He remembered the throttled puppy from the hunting dogs, when Richard was five. He remembers the horribly burnt serving boy, when Richard was perhaps nine or ten. He remembered, most lucidly, the maid he had literally stumbled upon in Richard's chambers. Her eyes rather attractively filled with terror and sadness, her lips rather inelegantly sewn shut with thread, and the skin peeled away from much of her lower body.

Quite why Richard should take pleasure in such torture escaped the Duke. Edward cared not one jot for the fate of some silly filly, as

beneath his regard as that irritating puppy, but he knew that such 'incidents' were not easily hushed up. A body buried at night, servants and soldiers who could then talk, one or two of whom could be bribed and one or two having their own accidents. The reputation and standing of the ruling house of Estoria was not to be lightly tarnished. His brother, with a dungeon full of grubbers, had never been happier - and all in the name of justice! Quite neat for all concerned! Except the grubbers, the Duke supposed.

As he mused, the Duke observed a courtier make his way from the great doors toward his dais in something of a hurry. News. He watched with wry amusement as the courtier was intercepted by a more senior colleague, no doubt aiming to pull rank and relieve the junior of his nugget of news, and then himself present it to the Duke, currying Edward's favour. The amusement dissipated as he saw the face of the senior courtier, the Master of the Rolls if memory served, fall at receipt of whatever news his colleague imparted. The Master of the Rolls stepped quickly back, and urgently gestured the underling onward - clearly feeling there was little to be gained by being the bearer of bad news. The Duke felt the throb of irritation begin to build around his temples once more.

"You man," he bellowed "what news?"

The courtier, still some distance from the Dais, unaware that he had been observed by the Duke since his entry, and more than a little shaken by his unnerving encounter with the Master of the Rolls, visibly blanched, and shuffled to a halt. Feeling the eyes of the entire court on him, and instinctively noting the Duke's raging gaze, he squeaked, then coughed, then said in too loud a voice "your men-at-arms sir.." and paused.

To the Duke's ears, this sounded very much like the courtier was introducing his soldiers entry to the court. Unusual for common men-at-arms to address the court, which made the reaction of the Master of Rolls understandable - a stickler for etiquette no doubt. However, the Duke could see now that the only plausible reason for men-at-arms to be presented was that they had caught up with the damned Gunthersson and were here to relay his bloody death. While Richard would be disappointed with an end to his sport in an official capacity, this whole fuss would be nicely wrapped up. "Send them in, my man!"

The courtier, who had been trying to frame the words "are all dead except two sorry-looking survivors, at least one of whom smells of urine and worse" in a way that might not infuriate his notoriously violent lord, took a further moment to understand what had happened.

"Shitoshitoshitoshitoshit" were words he left unsaid. He spun on his heel, back toward the Great Doors. He had no choice now but send it the pathetic shit-stained losers he'd already ascertained the fate of the rest of the regiment from, and pray that the storm that followed fell elsewhere. On the heads of the stupid, bloody, men-at-arms for example.

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"Right, Sam lad, I'm your uncle, right, and I'll look out for you right, I've been in some tighter scrapes than this, right, so let me do the talking, right?" Samuel Worth looked across at his uncle. He loved the fool, course he did, but Sam wasn't blind to the fact that beyond a certain presence of mind when it came to self-preservation, his uncle wasn't the sharpest tool in the box. He sighed, bowed his head and listened as the doors to the Ducal Hall opened.

As Sam and his uncle were led toward the Duke's dais, Sam's mind was racing.

"Ah, my good men," boomed the Duke "tell us of the fate of the monster Gunthersson - is he dead or captured?"

"My Duke, we came upon the rogue in the dead of night, and took immediate steps to flank his position to prevent his escape, however seeking to break through the tightening noose, he charged us, not on his own of course, there was a whole horde of ferocious berserker-dwarves with him. Our regiment was shaken by the ferocity of the charge sir, but my uncle here shouted 'steady lads' and we took the charge and pushed the dwarves back, my lord, numbers against us and time on the dwarves' side, I screamed a challenge at Gunthersson and we clashed, bloodied sword to axe, and as I beat him back, his confederates appeared to waver, but then, from nowhere we were attacked in the rear by yet more

dwarves, another horde, perhaps two, our men did you proud sir - dying where they stood, fighting to the last, till me and my uncle, back to back we was, were all that remained, 'Sam!' shouted my uncle 'we must get word to the Duke!' and though we were minded to die with our comrades, taking as many of the bearded bastards as we could, I saw sense in his words and we cut a bloody path through them, my lord, to return here."

Finally, Sam took a breath. His Uncle, agog, added nothing. All eyes turned to Duke Edward.

Edward looked at the skinny boy-soldier, and glanced at his piss-stained uncle. The enormity of the news weighed down on him. An entire mounted regiment broken, with the sorry remains before him. The story the boy told must be nonsense. Gunthersson was a sales clerk - where would he get a blasted army from? An army of Dwarves? 'The Western Clans' - a ragtag of inbred trappers, miners, loners and freaks, were the pathetic remnants of the Dwarven families which had resisted the foundation of the Dukedom, all those generations ago, preferring to stay in the hills rather than share in the wealth of the Dukedom, perhaps? It seemed laughable.

He'd seen the odd gold miner or trapper stumbling in the gutters of the poorer quarters of Estoria, bottle of grog in dirt encrusted hand, having spent their pitiful earnings. Vomit-stained and incoherent. Could these laughable grubbers be responsible for the destruction of a regiment? It seemed unlikely. Clearly the boy-soldier had not told the full story - perhaps no part of it.

The Duke looked around the Hall and considered his options. The boy's story would be around the city before nightfall, regardless of its veracity. In addition, whatever had actually happened to his men, the damage done to the prestige of his Dukedom had to be addressed. He schemed in the moments before he spoke.

"I, Duke Edward III, lord of Estoria, Protector of the Marches and Knight-General of the Order of the Torch, hereby declare war on the Western Clans who have clearly rallied to the criminal Gunthersson. I call to arms the Ducal forces, the trained bands, the Merchant Guards, the Feudal Host of Greater Estoria, and the knightly Order of the Torch. I call upon those present to witness

my oath - this sword" he called, as he hefted his sword from its sheath "will not rest until Gunthersson is dead and the Clans extinct!" The hall erupted into bellicose cheering. For the first time in a decade, the Dukedom was to be mobilised for war!

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Most of his family had fled to the treeline long before the human forces reached the farmstead. Old Erik had declined to clamber after them. His leg too arthritic and his pride similarly swollen by long life. He could smell the damp smoke from the burning hayrick before he saw the first horseman. The first horsemen sighted Erik first, and called to his colleagues, who vectored in on this - the first Dwarf they had seen during the campaign.

"Grandfather!" Called one of the men, "tell us where Gunthersson and his band are and we'll let you live!"

"I have nothing for you, but my pitchfork - get off my land you longshanked arsonists!" He bellowed back.

From the treeline Esme Grundeep watched as her grandfather was cut down by hounds in the shape of men. She listened to their baying as they circled the carcass that had been her Granddad just moments before. "Gunthersson", she whispered, tightening the grip on the hammer in her hand, as her youngest, Emma, pulled at her skirt.

Tales from the Crippled Goose

by Mike Tittensor

The Roadwardens Tale:
A Single Oak Leaf

It was raining in Baerlauch. Good weather was never really common in this damp corner of Ardovikia but today it was sufficiently wet that even the damp, malodorous peasants looked out from under the dripping thatch and commented on its intensity. Summer was fading and autumn's brown fingers were stretching across the land. Baerlauch was a small market town, unremarkable for anything apart from its presence on the road to other more interesting places. It served as a nexus for the area farmers' produce, a rest stop for travellers and a centre for the production of such local wares, as the farmers themselves could not make. The locals knew very little of the world outside the rolling moors. Most didn't care to either, so topics of conversation tended towards the mundanery of husbandry, food and the weather.

On this day, their attention was drawn away from the inclement weather as the town gates opened to admit a lone traveller. Lean and muscular, he wore the leathers and mail of the Letharac Roadwardens beneath his heavily oiled all-weather cloak and hat. He rode tall in the saddle, commanding and authoritative, his eyes scanning the roads for trouble. His name was Vestin Bard and he was popular in the town, ever since he had brought in the head of the ogre that had kidnapped Goodwife Elspeth two winters ago. There was always a seat near the fire for him in The Crippled Goose Inn and the measures were always full rather than skimped. His personal history was little known. He had no family, much to the interest of the ladies of the town, but seemed in no way inclined to start one. His accent when he spoke, for his words were few, suggested an origin outside Ardovikia. He was a regular visitor and would occasionally deposit the head of an orc raider or marsh wolf at the foot of the statue of Primavera in the market square.

Pulling up his broad chestnut mare in front of the stables, he dismounted with a creaking of leather, his heavy boots raising a splash of muck as he descended to earth. Flicking a small coin to

the stable lad, he let the boy lead the horse away. They were old acquaintances and the mare allowed the boy liberties that would have seen other men lose fingers to her snapping teeth. The boy knew that if the Roadwarden were pleased with his horse's treatment, there would be a second coin in the morning. Bard himself strode towards the Goose's weatherworn front door, pausing to scrape off the mud before ducking under the lintel into the smoky, companionable gloom of the common room. He settled himself in his corner as always and accepted the leather mug of dark beer and bowl of stew that was standard fare here. Those who watched noticed that his eyes lingered for a moment on the figure of the barmaid that had served him only to turn away with a wistful sad look on his face.

He had been away for an unusual length of time, several months in fact, rather than the monthly appearance the locals had come to expect. The common room was therefore already packed. The worthies of Baerlauch smelled a good story in the offing. There was already a professional storyteller in the common room, regaling the locals with what was laughingly classed as 'international news'. He was a small, ratty man dressed in a motley robe. His face was lined and dirty but he had a certain intensity of gaze that could hold an audience in thrall on a good day. This was not one of them. His tales were not well received, being the same old woes of bandits, orc raiders and elven slavers rampaging around the South.

The patrons seemed in no mood for this sort of thing tonight. Eventually the storyteller fell silent and sank his nose in his ale mug, watching the common room over its rim. There was no applause, merely an aura of anticipation. Finally the landlord, a portly fellow who doubled as a pig butcher in his spare time, hefted a sausage on a roasting fork into the air and said "Come now, anyone else care to give us a tale. A fine plate of wurst for the best story". There was silence for a moment and the landlord's gaze swept the room. He stopped to consider the Roadwarden who was still watching the movements of the young barmaid, a new girl from somewhere up in the Moors. The landlord had employed her only a few weeks ago. "So Master Roadwarden, surely you must have news for us? What can you tell us of the wider world"?

Vestin Bard regarded the landlord coolly. He seemed to be weighing up different thoughts and finally put down his food and drink, leant

forward in his chair and spoke. “Aye, I have a tale for you. A strange tale but none the less true. It concerns a Roadwarden, one of the Brotherhood that keeps townships such as yours safe”. Again the odd accent that the landlord could not place. Out of the corner of his eye, though, he noted that the barmaid had stopped to listen. With a nod of encouragement towards the Roadwarden he looked at the rest of the customers who had also fallen silent. All seemed eager, even the professional who scented a story he might steal for his repertoire.

“To the East of here, the roads rise up through the Elfmoors, as you know. They’re a hard area with ancient ruins of the Elder Folk dotting the landscape. The wolves are numerous and aggressive. There’s worse than wolves too. The odd troll wanders down from the hills and occasionally you see griffins from the mountains looking for stray sheep. The farmers need their wits about them. There’s a road that cuts towards Berndorf over the Krupp Hills. It’s Dwarf made but it’s not used that often anymore and with good reason. One spring, as the snows cleared, a Roadwarden of my acquaintance was checking along this road and came upon the strangest thing he’d seen. In a small vale beneath Cronewife Hill he came upon a wood. This wood was right across the road and assuredly had not been there the autumn before, yet the trees were mature oaks and beech. Since it was only early spring, he could even make out a set of ruins in the heart of this wood. Well, being a Roadwarden it was his duty to explore so he approached the wood and passed under the dark branches of the trees. The dwarf road was still there, simply surrounded by the mature trees. It was quiet though, too quiet. There were no birds proclaiming their territories and looking for a mate. No small animals rustled in the leaf litter. Only the trees stood sentinel to this marvel.

After a few minutes he came level with the ruins. It was clearly the remains of an old temple but for the life of him, the Roadwarden did not remember ever having seen the ruins before and he knew this area well, or so he thought. He dismounted, hitched his horse’s reins to a nearby tree and advanced silently through the woods. Some prescient thought made him draw his sword from its oiled scabbard and palm a weighted throwing knife in his left hand. He reached the entrance to the temple without observing any sign of life but he had survived too many encounters not to continue to be cautious.

He slipped inside the doorway and moved to the side. The temple had no roof but the interior was in reasonable repair. Stone benches still stood in rows. The High Altar, although stripped of icon or statue, was intact. There were even remains of plaster and paint on the walls. Padding silently down the side aisle, the Roadwarden noticed how the wind and the rain did not seem to penetrate here. There was an aura of calm aloofness from the forest outside.

Finally he reached the high altar and looked at it carefully. Barely discernible scratches in the form of an eagle revealed that this had once been dedicated to Our Lord Aestius but when and how this came to be built here was unknown. Convinced he had seen enough the Roadwarden turned to leave to perceive the figure blocking the doorway. A dark figure he was, in mail with a maul over his shoulder and a long black beard. He was no woodland bandit though. His eyes burned with a ghostly green light and as the Roadwarden watched, he drifted forward down the centre aisle, his feet, it seemed, not entirely attached to the floor.

A dread of the dark things of the forest seized the Roadwarden and he backed away around the altar as the wraith closed upon him. As it raised the maul to dash out his brains, he ducked under its swing and drove his sword through its chest. Now Roadwardens are a superstitious bunch…" At this Bard smiled and took a quick pull from his beer. "And this fellow was no exception. He'd had his sword thrice blessed by the Priest of Aestius in Berndorf the previous High Holy Day and it cut through the ghost like fire through butter. The maul clattered to the ground and the wraith dissipated like smoke in a breeze.

Well, the Roadwarden was shaken, I can tell you. He breathed deeply and muttered a prayer to Aestius before starting to head for the door. He was halfway up the aisle when the same figure, showing no signs of any wounds stepped into the doorway again, heaving its maul above its head. This time it rushed upon him and he was forced to parry the high strike with a clang. Then, twisting his sword downwards he skewered the thing through its neck on the riposte. Again at the touch of the sanctified sword, the wraith collapsed upon itself. The Roadwarden was pretty scared by now and wanted out of here. He could hear his horse whinnying in the distance and he began to run towards the entrance. A third time,

though, the dark figure appeared in the doorway, maul in hand. The Roadwarden was ready though. Swinging his sword to intercept the maul as it began to arc in towards him, he stepped forward and thrust the dagger in his left hand in and up into where the spectre's heart would have once been. The apparition gave a wail and faded again.

As he ran, the Roadwarden glanced at his blades to note that they were pitted and corroded as if they had lain out on the ground for many years. His horse had gone, the branch where he had hitched it snapped with violence. Not really blaming it, he retreated back through the wood in search of it. He found it grazing quietly at the edge of the trees as if nothing had happened and he spent several minutes calming it, checking its tack and generally taking his own mind off the events of the previous hour. As he finished his tasks with his mount, he became aware that he was being watched. Glancing up without moving his head, he saw a cave high up on Cronewife Hill. Again, he thought he knew most of the caves in this area since they tended to be the natural dens of animals and worse. Yet this one was new to him. He could make out a vague human figure, sunk back in the shadows of the cave mouth to be sure but still visible watching him.

He mounted his horse and began to ride back up the road, deliberately looking in every direction except towards the cave. Once he had crested the rise, he swung back and rode up through the hillside gorse to bring him above the cave entrance. Here, he tied his horse's reins to a bush and began to creep downhill to the mouth of the fissure. The first thing he noticed was the smell, an unwholesome reek of rotting flesh and ordure. The next thing was the flies, great fat bloated creatures that had no right being about this early in the spring. Drawing his weapons, he edged round the side of the cave mouth and peered within.

It went back about thirty paces into the hill, its rear almost lost in the gloom. The limestone walls were daubed with ochre paint to depict strange, unpleasant figures with horned headdresses (he hoped they were headdresses) cavorting and dancing. Elsewhere the image was of an eight-spoked wheel supported by two flanking skeletons. Inside the door was a fire pit with old ashes and next to it a bed. Upon the cot lay a skeletal form dressed in rags. Its long grey hair bedecked with blue beads suggested a woman but it was

difficult to be sure. Lying at her side was a fresh corpse of a hare, its innards exploded from stomach gas and the maggots crawled freely over its skin.

Although not a squeamish man, the Roadwarden disliked something about the intensity of the dead animal's stare, which seemed to follow him around the cave. Beyond this at the back, the Roadwarden made out a stone table lit from above by a shaft rising up through the rock. Stepping warily forward he could see a twisted dagger driven with great force into the tabletop pinning a painted card to the surface marred the polished top. A thin pile of other painted cards lay beside it.

The Roadwarden stepped forward and looked down at the table. The painted card showed a picture that filled him with fear. It was of a woodland scene at the heart of which was a ruined temple almost lost among the twisting branches. At the doorway of the temple was a shadowy figure, barely a smudge in charcoal, of a human figure with a hefty weapon over its shoulder. He switched his sword to his left hand and took hold of the hilt of the dagger. It was wrapped with badly finished leather where the bristles of whatever animal had furnished the skin still clung to the surface. He heaved fruitlessly at the dagger only for the hilt to cut his hand. It was stuck firmly into the polished stone of the table.

He pulled again, wincing at the pain from his hand but all the more intent on removing that dagger. Blood trickled down the hilt and he watched with suddenly frozen fascination as a single scarlet trail pooled on the cross hilt and then dripped onto the blade itself. At the first touch, the dagger sprang free of the tabletop. The Roadwarden staggered, dropped both his sword and the dagger and leant against the cave wall. He did not notice that the hand he used to steady himself left a bloody handprint alongside the other marks on the pale stone. He felt dizzy and sick. He was both guilty and relieved at what he had done and felt the need for fresh air and the open sky.

He turned towards the cave mouth and groaned. There, before him, stood an old woman, her silver hair floating freely in some unfelt breeze with blue crystal beads threaded through it. Of the skeleton on the bed, there was no sign. Her eyes blazed with the same intensity as the dark warrior in the ruined temple but on her lips

was a smile. It was not a pleasant one. It was the twisted smile of the hunter that has cornered its prey. The crone's voice was thin and reedy as she said, "So you did not like the fate chosen? Yet a choice must be made. Look at the other cards and tell me which you would rather have".

The Roadwarden tried to step forward only for the old woman to wave her hand slowly and he froze. His limbs simply refused to move him any further forward. She shook her head and smiled. "None of that. There must be a path. A choice must be made. You will choose one of those cards, young man. Fate can be changed, yes, the greatest mages in Leith know that but it cannot be denied. Now choose"! At this she clenched her fist and the Roadwarden felt a searing pain in the palm of his bleeding hand. "Choose"!

He turned back to the painted cards and picked up the first. At once he felt the same dizziness as when he had pulled out the dagger. Then he looked into the painting. The figures moved in his mind only stopping when he focused very closely on them through a supreme effort of will. Trees swayed in some unseen wind. He felt as if he could hear the leaves rustling. Witchery of the worst sort! Then the magic overcame him and he was drawn into looking at the image.

At first it seemed to be a simple woodland grove with a well at its centre at the side of the road. A merchant caravan approached and paused to fill their water casks and canteens. The portly merchant on a mule at its head reminded the Roadwarden of a man he had met in Letharac. As the Roadwarden watched, the merchant wiped his forehead with a kerchief and then drank from his newly filled canteen. At first he seemed satisfied with its taste and drank a second time He licked his lips and drank a third time emptying the canteen with relish. Then he dismounted and made for the well. Halfway there he paused, sank to his knees and with a look of surprise toppled over, dead before his body hit the cobbles of the dwarf road. From the trees the Roadwarden then watched a flock of black winged creatures, perhaps once akin to bats descend to feed on the members of the caravan, all of whom lay dead on the road. The Roadwarden threw the card from his hand and it landed beneath the stone table.

"Not to your taste, eh"? cackled the old woman. "You are the lucky

one. You get to choose the fate". Haltingly, the Roadwarden picked up the second card. Again the dizziness and nausea. Again the feeling of being drawn into the depths of the landscape.

It was dark on the road and the wood had disappeared. By the light of the moons, the Roadwarden saw a pedlar approach, holding a small lantern in a box of wrought iron and glass. The Roadwarden knew the fellow, an itinerant knife sharpener and whitesmith from somewhere to the South in Valentica. The pedlar was making good progress in the dark, no doubt hoping to find somewhere to sleep soon. He passed under the lea of a great rock overhanging the path and then stopped, looking behind him. Atop the rock, its form outlined by the moonlight behind it, was a monstrous beast.

Its body was in form that of a great wolf but its head was too broad and its mouth filled with jagged teeth in several rows. From its shoulders, stubby wings sprouted uselessly and around its neck a crest of feathers flicked out and closed like a peacock's as it watched the pedlar. Then without a word or noise from either of them, it leapt from the rock and sank its fangs into the man. The scene shifted. Clearly time had passed. The roadside was now littered with bodies now. Some were travellers, others soldiers and among the common folk, knights in full harness lay dead, their armor stained with blood and their limbs broken. The nobility of Man brought low by the ferocity of the wilderness. The Roadwarden sank to his knees as he dropped the card. "No, not that one either, then? This might take longer than I thought".

The third card was even harder to pick up than the first two. A dribble of vomit trickled down the side of the Roadwarden's mouth. This time the wood was back but at its heart was not a temple but a single bloated tree. Its bark twisted and groaned as if something or some things inside desperately wanted to break out. A strange ichor oozed from cracks and glistened like blood as it flowed down the wood. The Roadwarden noted that strange lizard-like things lapped at the ichor with their prehensile tongues.

One such creature was suddenly engulfed by a spurt of the ichor and trapped within, like a fly in amber. Its companions kept feeding. The tree had leaves like strips of rags, dark, grey and brown, fluttering without noise. As the wind gusted, the strips shredded and floated off into the air, being born downwind. The

Roadwarden found himself following them through the air as the floated across the moors. There he saw the town of Baerlauch before him. As the dark strips passed over the town walls they dipped down to the ground, occasionally stroking the exposed cheek or hand of a passing townsman or woman. Where they did, dark boils sprang up or fiery rashes erupted on skin. The townsfolk scratched furiously but with horror the Roadwarden saw the boils spread over their bodies and then pass from person to person without restraint. In a matter of moments, Baerlauch was a screaming mass of plague-ridden victims. He managed to crumple the card as he threw it violently away.

“Actually, you’d be surprised at how often some people choose that one” came the witch’s voice behind him. He turned and looked at her, wild eyed, as he seized the next one, determined to end this ordeal.

The fourth card was a picture of a glade in which dancers cavorted around a fire. The orange flames flickered and the light reflected from the trees where grisly trophies of skulls and other things too horrible to describe were displayed in triumph. The Roadwarden looked at the dancers, lost in abandoned exultation, mostly naked, ecstatic, consumed by their passions. They were human or had been once. Now the marks of dark magic were upon them, a deformed limb here, a pallid glow to the skin there. As they danced, the Roadwarden looked at the fire where a pyre was set and at its heart a noble knight writhed and screamed as the flames consumed his body while his captors laughed. With a shudder, the Roadwarden recognised the knight as having the face of his elder brother whom he had not seen for years. Clinging to the stone table for support, he dropped the card. Spatters of blood from beneath his fingernails marked the card.

The fifth card showed a pool of dark water near the roadside. It was not unpleasant in itself. There were trees and grass and a merchant train had camped here. Two merchants were discussing pricing of their goods in an animated, good-hearted manner. Again the Roadwarden was convinced that he had seen these men coming up from Sathoi over the last couple of years. Then, without reason the discussion went from animated to aggressive in tone. One merchant called the other a cheat. The second called the first a liar. The first merchant then lunged at his companion with a belt-knife and they

rolled on the ground with murderous intent. After a few minutes struggle, the first merchant triumphed. He fumbled for something inside his victim's robes and grinned with a feral smile. He was a changed man. A darker, twisted soul now walked the land. The Roadwarden was far enough back in the picture though to have seen behind them, to have sensed the brooding, lurking presence in the pool that had reached out into their minds to twist their thoughts and words. Two simple, fallible humans had been made to battle murderously and then go out to make the world a worse and darker place. Once allowed into the world, it would work its evil through others. So far, that had been the worst fate of all. To take men's bodies and lives was bad. To steal their souls and minds was worse. Struggling to his feet, he spun the card away from him. Behind the Roadwarden, the old woman frowned.

The last card showed the woodland returned. A young woman stepped from the trees and stood looking at him. She was clad in browns and greens. Her features were too sharp to be beautiful but her hair was long and fine falling in corn coloured waves. Beside her stood a knight. Instead of armor of metal he stood wearing plates made from bark. His shield sprouted shoots of new life and his weapon was a great club of hardwood. The young woman was clearly a nymph, one of the wood spirits that unwittingly lured travellers away from their families and friends for a generation so that they might only return long after the death of those that they loved.

The Roadwarden looked at the nymph and inside his head could hear her voice saying that she only desired him and never wished to hurt anyone. With saddened eyes he turned to look at the knight standing behind her. The knight looked directly back at him, the first figure so far to have been able to perceive him from all the cards. The knight's face was his own.

The Roadwarden stood and regarded at the old woman. She smiled knowingly and played unconsciously with the beads in her hair. An aura of triumph passed across her face. "Choose, Roadwarden," she murmured. Without a word, the Roadwarden took this last card and picked up the twisted knife. He issued a prayer to the old gods to watch over his family in distant lands and asked that they might forgive him for never returning to them. He then placed the card on the stone table and drove the bloodstained blade into the card.

There was a return of the dizziness but he felt stronger and clearer-headed than before. The witch stood before him. She had taken up his sword and held it out in front of her, its tip pointing at his breast. “Oh, a noble choice. Such self sacrifice!” she mocked him. “However, I desire more than simply your soul for a few years. I will have more”.

“No” said the Roadwarden, normally a man of few words and from within his jacket he hurled the throwing knife left-handed. It tumbled through the air and both watched it as it completed its last arc to embed itself in the witch’s eye socket. For a moment, a look of surprise flitted across her face and then the pale skin parted to reveal the skull beneath. The flesh on her hands fell away and the Roadwarden’s sword dropped to the cave floor with a discordant clang. With a clatter, the ancient dry bones collapsed on a heap next to the bed. Still the corpse of the slain hare regarded him but he stepped past it noticing that the maggots were dead and the stench of putrescence had faded. Picking up his sword and retrieving his knife from the skull, the Roadwarden stepped out of the cave and looked down into the vale. The wood was still there but more wholesome. He turned his horse loose and then began to walk down towards it. In the trees, he could see a lithe, blonde figure darting between the trees waiting for him to come to her”.

The denizens of the common room of the Crippled Goose Inn sat silently and looked at Ventis Bard. None dared speak. Bard drained his beer mug and waved it meaningfully at the barmaid who refilled it. The landlord noted that a brief smile passed between the two as she poured the brown liquid from an earthenware jug. He turned back towards the common room and added, “The story is about how sometimes one is faced with choices that are all bad. There is no easy and right choice. The gods test us to see if we can choose the least bad option. The story is a metaphor for the complications of real life as opposed to fairy stories. Do you understand”? There was some hurried nodding and some relieved looks in the bar as they all said that, yes, of course they understood it was a ‘mettifore’, what did you take us for, peasants? The Roadwarden shook his head and turned his attention to the sausages. After a while the common room cleared and the patrons of the Goose departed for their homes. The rain had given over and there was a clean fresh smell to the air; well as clean and as fresh as Baerlauch ever got.

The landlord waited for the last of them to go before he went to collect the sausage plate. He was shrewder than most. Either that or he didn't know what a metaphor was. "So is that Roadwarden still there with the nymph then"? he asked. Ventis Bard looked up into his eyes and smiled sadly.

"No, he's not. One can apparently not simply kill a witch like that with a simple blessed dagger. She was waiting for the next traveller, a young knight from Primantor with grand ideas and hopes. He was given the same choices bar one. Instead of the nymph and self-sacrifice, he was shown a knight-errant who defended the road against all comers, a knight in oak armor bearing a mighty club. If he could defeat that knight he would have won and would break the curse forever".

"And"? asked the landlord, wiping the sausage fat off his fingers onto his apron. "Did he? Was the curse broken"?

"Not in quite that way, no. He was a mighty knight and one swing of his sword split the wood-knight's club in two. However, he didn't think to look for a punch dagger in the wood-knight's left hand. So, now, there is a new, one-eyed wood knight and the old one has moved onto better things". At this, he winked at the barmaid whose face split into a broad grin. For a first time, the landlord really noticed that her hair was blonde and that tucked behind one ear, she had a single oak leaf.

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The Laborers Tale:
By a Single Thread

Two men sat in the Crippled Goose and listened to the news of the outside world over the rims of their tankards. Both were broad shouldered and muscular, bespeaking a manual profession. Both were pink cheeked and weather-beaten, indicating an outdoor life. What the careful eye would pick out were the specks of soot around eyelids and fingernails, which soap and water would not shift, telling of a life involving fire. The thoughtful mind would also pause to consider that indeed soap and water had actually been

applied, which marked them out as different from the peasant farmers and herders that normally filled the common room with their stink.

Such a mind belonged to the landlord of the Crippled Goose, a portly man with outrageous whiskers and a hobby as a freelance pig butcher. He had run the Goose for years now and could judge his customers well. These two intrigued him. However, the inn was busy and his new barmaid had left his employ the previous day with a Roadwarden. It was late in the evening before the common room quieted down leaving the regulars, the odd couple and the rat faced storyteller who'd been hanging around for days now telling poor quality tales and pretending to know the news of the outside world. Indeed he'd been trumped by the Roadwarden the night before who had told a scary tale of witches and curses up on the moors. Finally, drawing himself a flagon of his light ale and spearing the last of his sausages from the pan by the fire, the landlord moved out into the common room and straddled one of the benches near the two men.

"Evening lads. Enjoy your dinner?" He nodded at the empty bowls of "House Stew" and the few crumbs of bread on the table. They had an appetite, right enough.

"Aye, landlord. It filled a hole," said the taller of the two. Taller? No, more erect was the right word.

"An' ah could even work out what animal some of the chunks ah meat came from" said the other, leaning forward on the table, drawing pictures on the wood with the dribbles of ale. He flashed a quick, infectious grin at the landlord from beneath an untidy fringe of black hair. The landlord recognized the accents as coming from up towards Berndorf.

"Oh, there's plenty that goes into my pot, pork mostly but sometimes the odd chicken and" raising his voice " sometimes visitors that don't settle their tabs." He was looking over the men's heads at the storyteller who flushed guiltily and buried his nose in his beer mug. Turning back to them, he asked "So you pair were here last night then? Did you hear the Roadwarden's Tale then? Who'd have thought a Roadwarden could keep us all entertained

like that then"? The two men glanced at each other, knowingly.

They knew not to interrupt the landlord in the middle of his flow. He was one of those men who liked to state their opinions in a flurry of questions. They let him blather on. The taller of the two had known another man like him long ago. A sudden dark thought flashed through his mind causing him to frown. The landlord paused.

"Aye landlord. Twas a good tale right enough. The Roadwarden got most of it right too."

The bar became silent. The regulars of the Goose had a good nose for a story.

"Come now, explain yourselves. You cannot leave that comment hanging like a string of sausages, sir..?"

"My name is Belerion. This is my colleague, Mictim. Tinners by trade. I'd happily explain myself, landlord, but the common room fire is smoky and our throats seem to be very dry."

Chuckling, the landlord rose and returned with a large pitcher of brown ale which he placed in the middle of the table between them. Both men grinned and filled their mugs. The taller looked at the shorter, who nodded and then looked away. Belerion cleared his throat and began to talk.

"We're tinners by trade. We hunt the veins of ore that rise to the surface of the earth up on the Moors. A good eye can pick out where the best outcroppings are likely to be. A strong back can bring the pick down well enough. A love of honest work and a good fire can bring the tin out from the ore and do the rest."

"A love of honest work"? Laughed one of the regulars, a sour faced herder from Mickledoe. "What's that? Why would any man love work"?

The landlord glowered but Belerion answered. "For pride. For honor and the right to hold your head up as a man in the evening time. Is that good enough for you"?

The herder looked away. There were a few murmurs of approval from the regulars. The herder wasn't popular with them on account of him being from Mickledoe, a whole two miles away and for his annoying habit of talking during other folk's stories. The landlord refilled Belerion's mug and then, finding Mictim holding his out too, the smaller man's as well.

"We were up towards Crone Wife Hill not long ago where your Roadwarden set his tale. Crone Wife Hill's a funny place where the rock rises hard out of the blessed earth. A likely spot for the Earth Lady to share her treasures." At this both men unthinkingly pressed a fist to their hearts. "We saw the wood too, aye, and lopped a few of the branches from the outer trees for the fire but we saw no ruins. It was an odd wood, right enough, out in the middle of the empty moor but we gave it no mind and pulled our truck back up towards the hill."

The landlord remembered seeing a sturdy truck in the stables. There had been shovels and picks and a tarpaulin covering a load. Certainly tin ingots were valuable enough to cover up.

"The weather was as grim as always up there but we were comfortable enough. There was a brisk West wind, thick with the promise of rain. When I were a lad, we called it The Breath of God and the priest told us that a wind like that could put life back into a corpse. It's always been a lucky wind for me and this time was no change. Within the hour Mictim here found a good outcropping of hour and we set to with a will." At this Mictim raised his hand in acknowledgement and took the opportunity to take hold of the beer jug before the landlord could stop him. Belerion continued, hiding a smile as Mictim refilled both their mugs and then passed the empty jug back to the landlord with a meaningful expression.

"We set up the fire in a dell in the lee of the hill and had a pleasant and profitable enough night. There are few creatures on the Moors that don't fear a good fire and that includes the stupidest of trolls. Even better, we'd found some crystals in with the ore, lumps as big as your thumb. A bright lad can heat those crystals and rich folk in Essen or Berndorf will pay good coin for them. If you do them right in the fire, they come up blue like a bird's egg. We'd had some of

those bacon joints from the butcher's across the road here. They were greasy as anything but Mictim wolfed it down. I told him he'd pay for it the next day."

This time it was the landlord at the bar who looked away, focusing on some imaginary spot of mud on the floor. "Any ways, next morning, we turned over the ashes and went back up the hill for a second load. Mictim had the pick this morning and I the shovel on account of him losing most rounds of stone-knife-parchment the night before. So he lays into the vein with a will until there's a shudder, like, and the ground gives way under his feet. Down he goes like a coney down a hole." Mictim raised his hands in front of the candle casting a shadow of a not very convincing looking rabbit on the wall. A couple of small children, up long past their bedtime, giggled at this. The landlord returned with another jug, vowing silently it was the last.

"Well, what do you do in times like that? You go down after him, don't you? So, I'm about to put the shovel down to take my jacket off when I looks round and there's this old woman standing nearby."

"'You'll nay fit down there after 'im, lover' she says. Come along with me an' we'll go in the front door shall we'? Well, I'm flabbergasted aren't I but there's nothing for it but I follows her round the side of the hill and there, plain as the nose on the herder's face over there..."

"Only without the warts of course" added Mictim. The herder scowled amid some laughter.

"Plain as plain was a cave. Now if that cave had been there previous like, then I'm the Lord High Consul and this is my golden goblet." He extended the mug to Mictim who obliged.

The landlord did not comment. He had noticed that Belerion's accent had thickened markedly during the last few minutes. He waited for the tall man to finish wiping foam from his mouth and begin again.

"So I'm following this old woman into the cave that wasn't there

before. Big and spacious with a fire, a bed, a stone table at the back. Nice place. I didn't think much of the decor though. She'd been scribbling things on the walls that weren't natural, like. Anyway, there at the back of the cave was Mictim sitting on top of the stone table and I'm thinking 'Mictim, lad, you had a lucky landing there. Rising up just between his legs was this wicked looking dagger that some fool had stuck in the top of the table and he was just sitting there staring at it.

Anyway at this point I starts forward, like, to see how he's doing when the old woman fixes me with an eye like a raven and I find I'm not able to move. Not an inch. Frozen like ice on the dawn's first chamber-pot. The shovel in my hand weighs a ton it feels but I can't even let it go. Then she smiles and swings her hips like some young trollop a third of her age and says 'You've got something I want'. Well, I'm a proud man and I don't like being talked to like that but all the while she's looking at me, there's nothing I can do. Then she smiles and strokes my arm and I'm sweating at the thought of being some witch's plaything."

"More familiar than her familiar" chuckled Mictim.

"Thank you, that's enough from you. So she starts reaching into my clothing and pulls out..."

Mictim began an impromptu drum roll on the tabletop sending a number of small drops of ale flying.

"And pulls out my pouch full of crystals. 'What did you think I wanted, lover?" she croaked like some mad old harridan. 'These will look beautiful in my hair, don't you think'? Then she picks up a long knife off the bed and shows it to me, edging the blade towards my face. Still, I can't move and I reckons my time has come. 'Or shall I use your eyes as beads, lover? They're such lovely eyes.'"

"Then my prayers were answered by a messenger from the goddess herself. Mictim's stomach had regretted the bacon of the night before and the stress of seeing me about to be mutilated did the rest. With a mighty roar, he let forth the most powerful breaking of wind that Man has ever seen. The stench was awful. I mean, the Crotch of Oskan smells better. Never has a man had a bottom like

that.

This upset the old witch and she swung around yelling at Mictim as you could imagine, which was foolish on account of me still having the shovel in my hand. By the application of which to the back of her head, I thought to end her wickedness and laid her out flat on the bed, thinking she would never rise again. It seems from the Roadwarden's Tale last night, I was not as successful as I first thought. However, it was good enough for us to escape and grabbing the truck and other trinkets, we fled for our very lives."

He smiled and drained his mug. "I thank you for your kind attention." The patrons of the Goose laughed appreciatively. It had been a good tale, a much needed bit of nonsense. They dispersed for the night and the tinners went up to the dormitory. The landlord cleared away. He had hoped for another story of valor and honor, not ribald slapstick on the back of another tale. He slept badly and was up early in a surly mood.

He was barely civil when the tinners came down to settle their bill but thanked them for their fantasy last night. Belerion raised one eyebrow and said "Fantasy? No fantasy, landlord. Anyone that knows Mictim here is afflicted with a most troublesome stomach. A martyr to it, he is. Well, we're off South to warmer climes. Maybe next year, landlord."

The landlord managed a curt smile and watched them go. He picked up the coins they had left on the bar and then froze. Among the bright copper coins lay a single blue crystal bead, catching the early morning sunlight. He picked it up and then dropped it alarm. It bounced off the counter and rolled under a table out of sight. It had not been the bead that had made him sit in the pantry for twenty minutes with a pie and a mug of strong barley wine.

It had not been the bead that made him visit the chapel of Aestius that afternoon to make a donation of particular generosity. It was not the bead that made him say his night prayers for weeks with the same fervor as he had in his childhood, praying to almighty Aestius to save him from the troll under his bed. No, what had caused him such anxiety was the strand on which the bead was threaded: a single, thick, iron-grey hair stained at one end with a still bright

speck of dried blood.

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The Nymph's Tale:
"An absence of time"

"I look down from the summit of the hill, my trees around me. They sigh around me, breathing for me, hearing for me. A crowd has gathered, torches in their hands. They are simple farming folk. It is one of the holy days. They have them. I do not know why. They look up to me as I stand at the edge of the trees, expectation, awe, fear in their eyes. They know that I am not like them, both more and less. At the back of the crowd, a sandy haired girl stands in a plain, undyed linen shift and glass beads in her hair. In her face is anger and sadness.

At the front of the crowd is a man, strong, broad shouldered. She watches him almost hungrily. He is young but powerful, wearing a belted tunic. I think that I see him working in the fields below or perhaps that was in a different place or (what is the word?) time. His eyes are wide, unnaturally so. The older man next to him carries a skin from whose neck a dribble of milky liquid falls to the earth. I smell mushrooms from near the marsh. The older man pushes the younger forward and he begins to walk up the hill towards my cave. Beyond his shoulder I see the tears on the cheeks of the sandy haired girl. She turns and walks into the darkness.

He walks closer. I smell him. I feel the wave of time flooding over me as he approaches. It exhilarates and fills me. How do they tolerate the ecstasy of the passing of events, the tender caresses of history forming around them? He stands before me, his breathing heavy and erratic. He smiles. They always smile. They always will. They always have. He leans down and we kiss. He is happy, so so happy up until the moment his mortal heart flutters and stops. The crowd cries out in triumph. They always do. They always will. I step back, the sensation of time ebbing like a fading scent of roses. I turn and walk into my cave where the mirror stands and look at myself. Sandy hair, plain undyed shift and beads in my hair. They smile. They always smile.

The farmers come and go. For a while ice laps around the base of my hill and then goes. Tall, elven folk ride North. For a moment I see a beautiful pale-skinned maiden with gems at my throat.

The farmers return. They build a new village far from the old one. They put walls around it. Then small, ironshod folk in coats of mail come. They build with stone and tar and sand putting a track around the base of the hill. I do not like looking at myself with a beard in the mirror.

The farmers move on down the valley and build in stone and wood. A man kills pigs. I hear him sometimes. On the wind I scent his beer. It smells like time. Do humans drink it to lose their sense of time?

A strange dark man comes from the East and builds a stone building with carvings of an eagle on its lintel. A bird of the air captured in the stone of the earth? He wears strange robes and chants when it is dark in a language unlike the farmers. His voice is not beautiful but moving. He approaches my cave but never enters. He falters at the edge and returns to his chapel, a mixture of longing and fear. I find myself with a pair of glowing wings sprouting from my back and some form of pantherskin tunic on many occasions. It itches. Then he is gone, laid in the earth like they all are.

Another comes. Young. Handsome. A knight. Dressed in burnished armor with a greatsword and songs on his lips. He sings of faraway lands and great adventures and his sadness for his absence from his family in a place called Primavantor. His horse is fine and he bears a golden necklace with a pendant in the shape of a broken heart. He sees me and comes with a faint, half formed smile but recoils and curses me with names such as “witch” and “ghost”. He runs from the hills calling down curses. I say nothing but do not understand. When I look in the mirror, my skin is pale as death, my lips dark and above the plunging cleavage of my fine gown are purple bruises around my throat.

She comes. I see her. The sandy hair now grey. The once tear-stained face now wrinkled and hate filled. There are still beads in her hair and she has power, terrible power that smells of sulphur and ash. She has a pet, a companion, dark and brooding. It moves

like water but is difficult to see. I feel fear but she sends it away to the base of the hill where it squats, its menace like brimstone. I cannot feel time around her. She takes my mirror from its stone table and I fall into it. Trapped inside, that gift from long ago, my mirror. I am now the frozen one. Now I am time. Now. I feel now. Now.

On my table there is a dagger driven into the stone. It is a wrong thing both in Man's world and mine. What has she done? She pulls out parchment and cards, inks and paints. She begins to draw. There are drawings on the wall. Bad drawings pulling more of that power into the cave. My trees. I think of my trees and try to remember their sounds. I cannot hear them. She comes again. Now I am no longer in the mirror. I and others are drawn out and placed on paper cards with a bone pen made from a dead hare, its blood the ink. She looks down at me and smiles. I stop.

A man stands over me holding the cards, rugged and dressed in mail and leathers. He is in pain. He is strong but in so much pain. He looks at the cards. I call to him. I feel his pain. He looks again at the cards, their texture like old skin and then chooses mine. She is behind him. She is angry, her face snarling like a cat. She holds a sword, a thing of steel and points it at his chest. I scream. I know I scream but I hear nothing. Then she is falling, a blade in her eye and I am no longer in the card. I am in a wood, a strange wood not made from my trees. There are great oaks but the wood is pensive and thoughtful. The trees murmur as they seek to understand what magic has been wrought here.

I felt the flow of time again. I turned to see him coming down from the cave above me. What was once my cave but will be no more. My trees have long since gone. I ran to the edge of the wood but some strange power stopped me from crossing the leathery boundary strip that skirted the wood. Was I still in the picture? Yet he stepped over the boundary and as he did so, he changed. His beard grew bushier, his shoulders broadened.

Instead of mail he was dressed in skins and leathers and his armor was of bark plates. A wreath of oak leaves bound his temples and in his hands he bore a mighty club and a wooden shield from whose front new fronds of growth sprouted. He smiled. We were happy there, yes, for a time, well, I at least was happy. I was his and he

was the Guardian of the Woodland Path, the gatekeeper between my old world and his past. He knew that he must stand as a barrier between the two. Some tried to go past him but stopped when they saw. Travellers, merchants and pedlars skirted round the wood.

Strange monsters slunk back into the trees unwilling to risk blows from the club, fear in their hearts. They yearned to step forth into the realm of Men but knew the look of his face meant that they would never make it past him. Yet we were happy. He was mine. I was his. I made necklaces from flowers to adorn his oak wreath, the wreath he could never lose and around the great oaken club, I draped wild flowers and dog roses. He smiled. We kissed but his heart endured. The first not to fade and still. I smiled.

Then the knight returned. He was older now but no less glorious. He went up to the cave past the wood. We saw him walk as if there was a pane of glass or a sheet of water between us. He did not perceive us but I saw her again, the sandy haired girl. She appeared young again, dressed in finery. She held out those accursed cards and pointed down towards us. She pleaded with the knight who nodded and, with that gleam of pride that comes only to the truly mad, he strode down the hill towards my guardian and me. Now he saw us.

Behind him, the sandy haired girl released the glamour around herself and appeared again as an aged grey haired crone with one eye and an oddly shaped skull. She grinned toothlessly and waved a mocking little wave at me while playing with the glass beads in her hair.

Those beads. They are in another memory from a space where I did not perceive time. They mean something but I do not know. While she looks at me I cannot sense time. I turn to see my Guardian standing on the road as he has always done. The knight strikes at him, calling for glory and victory and the intervention of gods whose names I do not know. He is mighty, mightier than my Guardian. His sword burns with the evening light from behind the hill. His armor is thick and finely crafted.

I remember the little ironshod people and wonder if they made it. My Guardian steps back again and again under a rain of blows. His

shield is broken and lies on the ground. The fronds of growth are blackened and dead, their gentle leaves burning as I watch. His mighty club is turning aside the knight's sword but each time only barely. Great notches are cut into it with every parry, the dents oozing dark sap like the forest's own blood. He holds it two handed now to resist the weight of the blows, the knight's blade dull red with the setting sun. Then I hear the crone's laughter, falling on the air like broken glass and my Guardian slows, his defence falters. The knight strikes and the great club shatters, leaving my Guardian with but a stump in his hands before him.

My Guardian steps back one last time, sweeping his foot back and putting his hand behind his back like a dancer. The knight begins to sing a paean of victory and raises his sword above his head to finish the duel. Only, he falters. He stops. My Guardian has thrown something from his left hand, a long knife of darkened iron. It sits in the left eye of the knight and he stops and sinks to his knees. As he leans forward the knife falls to the ground amid a stream of blood. My Guardian seizes it up and runs towards the edge of the wood, taking my wrist. "We must go, girl, now" I think that is the first time he has spoken to me.

He steps beyond the boundary and pulls me out beyond it. I feel a tearing pain and then…I am free. I feel time next to my Guardian. I hear the trees, all the trees. I look up at the cave and the crone is gone. I look back to my Guardian. His beard is less bushy. He is not as large as he once was but his smile is gentler. He tells me his name is Ventis Bard. A funny name. I like it. I do not have a name but he says he will call me Primavera. I have never had a name before. He tells me to follow the road to the village where a kindly man will give me work until he has finished what he needs to do in the cave. I nod and agree. I walk towards the village while he climbed the hill to the cave with the knife in his hand. I feel no time but it does not seem to matter.

As I approached the village, I heard a distant wail and time returned like a cold shower of rain. Rain that suddenly became very real and wet. I was cold. I sheltered beneath an oak tree. It sang to me and I placed one of its leaves in my hair so I could always hear it. I know he will come for me, soon."

The landlord wiped his hands on his bloodstained apron and

regarded the girl. Blonde. Good figure. Face a little too sharp of feature to be truly beautiful but clearly wet from the rain and absolutely, definitely barking mad. Still a landlord (with a sideline as a freelance pig butcher) with work to do and customers to tend cannot be choosy. “You can sleep in the stable loft. A copper a day and board. Take it or leave it”. Turning back to the Crippled Goose, the landlord watched his patrons coming in for the night. He smiled.

Dungeon-Crawlers

by Richard Rimington

Stars twinkled high in the night sky as three figures, two tall and one short, silently approached the wide cavern entrance. As they stepped inside, traces of moonlight crept through behind them to reveal the ghostly outlines of carved stone blocks and bundles of scrap scattered across the interior.

“We’ll need some light in here,” said Belizor. “I’ll take care of it,” he said. There was a pause. “Be ready if something comes at us.”

There was a dwarven grunt in response.

With a soft gaseous pop, an orange flame burst into life at end of Belizor’s staff, throwing a warm and flickering light across the huge cavern to reveal sides that stretched away into shadow and a high chiselled roof far above them. The sight that greeted them was not pleasant.

“Well,” said Belizor. “At least none of them are moving, I suppose,”

The sweeping chamber was filled with the abandoned detritus from countless generations of crude occupants, mixed with the collapsed masonry of a finer, older craft. Dead bodies were slumped across most surfaces, several dozen at the very least, their ribs and skulls visible through their withered flesh.

There was a frantic scuttling noise from all around that Belizor sincerely hoped was rats. He jabbed at a corpse with his staff. “Does anyone need some…” he kneeled down to examine the body closer. “Well, no actually. He doesn’t really have anything...”

Lyrian the elf sneered in a gesture of contempt and reflexively flicked his long hair.

“Bandits,” growled Rockfist. He marched forward several steps and began stamping on a body. “They’re not getting up.”

Belizor saw Lyrian grit his teeth to hold back a response, and smiled

to himself in amusement.

“Shall we smash them up? So they can’t come back later and bother us?” said Rockfist earnestly.

“If you want…” said Belizor.

Rockfist immediately got to work.

Belizor stood up and tried to consider whether the cavern met his expectations. It was breath-taking in size, the core of it probably naturally occurring but over the years expanded to reach its current magnitude. At the far end of the chamber stood the towers of the mighty dwarven gateway, looming over them to mark the entrance into the holds beyond, where their destination lay. It had become battered and broken by the passing of millennia and scavenged for materials by greedy squatters, but its size remained imposing.

Great platforms and pillars lined its structure, wide stairways and soaring arches leading up to the dark portals beyond. Anything of value had long since been sheared from the face of the structure, but as he absorbed the ambience of the room Belizor considered how the many eras of history in this place were reflected by the conflicting layers of civilisation he saw around him.

Lyrian had begun to progress across the floor of the cavern, working through the thick mess of junk in his path, and Belizor hurried to join him.

“What do you make of this?” Belizor whispered.

“What is there to make of it?” Lyrian muttered back coldly.

“Well, what about these people?”

Lyrian rolled his eyes. “Bandits of your kind rarely live long, in my experience.”

This room had definitely been a major settlement, Belizor realised. The remains of tents and campfires, even dirty washing and personal possessions lay tramped across the floor around them

where the bandits had lived at the foot of the ancient complex. Since the abandonment of the great halls, Belizor knew, many scavengers sought shelter in these ruins over the centuries. But these corpses were freshly slain.

“But what killed them?” Belizor continued, trying to keep his patience in the face of the elf’s obstinacy. There was simply no point in raising his voice to Lyrian he had learned. “Was it, say, other bandits? Or was it the undead that did this? I can see barricades built here, and these people clearly did not die of natural causes. I feel this is an important distinction, considering…”

Lyrian raised a hand sharply for silence and Belizor instantly fell quiet. The sound of a pounding hammer continued in the background.

“Rockfist! Cease your damnable smashing!” Lyrian swore at him.

Rockfist begrudgingly slowed and stopped, regarding Lyrian with a sullen glare.

Belizor couldn’t hear anything but he had learned to trust the elf’s instincts by now. They waited together for several minutes.

“Something is ahead” muttered Lyrian eventually.

“Something,” said Belizor. “That’s brilliant. Thank you. Something. Where would we be without your insights?” He could never decide if the elf was able to recognize sarcasm or not, but he tried anyway.

By local accounts, though the cavern had been constantly occupied its residents had seldom ventured far inside for fear of its cursed reputation and bewildering internal labyrinths. Any noise coming from the deep was surely not a good noise.

“Rockfist,” whispered Belizor. “Get up here.”

Rockfist approached, crunching bones and clattering rusted weapons with his clumsy feet. Lyrian and Belizor shared a frustrated look.

“There’s something coming, Rockfist, from up the stairs,” Belizor told him quietly.

Rockfist gripped his weapon tightly, feeling the thrill of anticipation for battle and breathing hard.

A tingle of dread crept up Belizor’s spine as he peered up into the shadows at the top of the carved stonework, a dancing orange glow filling their walls from the silent flicker of his flame. Had they alerted some secret trap, he feared, even now sending the forces of the enemy surging out to greet them? He let a spark of electricity play between his fingers in anxiety.

The silence continued. “I think,” said Lyrian slowly, “that we should climb the stairs.”

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Several weeks earlier…

Belizor collapsed back on the wooden bench next to Lyrian and sighed in weary exhaustion. “How many more to go?” he asked the elf as his picked up his flagon of mead and drained a significant quantity.

Lyrian calmly appraised the stack of papers he had brought to the tavern. “Not many.”

They suddenly became aware of a commotion develop across the other side of the room, and the displeasure of angry voices as something forced its way through the crowd. People were jostled and shoved, till at last the assembled drinkers parted to reveal a scarred dwarf, naked except for a dented coat of banded armour and marching his way towards their table.

“Are you here about the advertisement?” said Belizor with a glimmer of hope.

“Aye,” Rockfist replied as he sat down heavily.

His smell was immediately apparent, and Lyrian made no effort to

hide as he physically gagged in response.

Belizor tried not to inhale. “Let’s get through this as quickly as possible,” he said. “What are your motivations for joining our expedition?”

“Vengeance,” Rockfist barked.

Belizor ticked the box for vengeance. A solid choice.

“Are you prepared to battle against the Liche-lord, to the death if necessary, as well as against whatsoever minions that may be sent to thwart our mission?”

“Aye,” said Rockfist.

Belizor nodded. The dwarf was doing well so far. “Well,” said Belizor, “I was going to ask if you had any skills relevant to navigating a dwarven hold, but I suppose we all know the answer to that one…”

There was an awkward silence

“Not all dwarves…” Lyrian whispered to him.

“Oh. Well… do you?” Belizor asked.

“Aye.”

“Excellent. And I see you’ve brought your own weapons and armour with you, even to the interview. Can I ask how we can get in contact with you, mister…?”

“Rockfist!” the dwarf rumbled. “You can find me alone, at the darkest depths of the deepest mine in these lands.”

“…Alright then. Thanks for your time.”

After he had gone, Belizor asked Lyrian, “What do you make of

him?"

"I think he's insane," Lyrian responded curtly.

"You know Lyrian, given what we're up against I think that could definitely be an advantage."

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As they crept up the worn stone surface step by step, traces of light from Belizor's torch began to gradually illuminate through into the halls beyond. A gibbering, maniacal laughter erupted from inside and they froze in their tracks. Lyrian drew his sword in a flicker of steel as a man charged out of the darkness towards them, a great bushy beard covering his face and his clothes dirty and ragged.

"Run, you fools!" the man howled. "Get out while you can! These chambers belong to the damned! I've seen such things… I've seen the dead Lord, coming for his prize within! Darkness shall pour out across all the world…" he scratched at his foaming mouth, and then hurled himself down the stairs. The group parted aside as the bedraggled man bounced past them, till eventually he landed in a bloody pile at the foot of the great staircase, quite dead.

"Well," said Belizor "I suppose that's probably a negative sign."

To the North

by Chris Davis

The world was ending, the sky was a hue of reddish black the ground cracked broken and dead. It was all coming to an end, but in ending there is a chance for another beginning. A new of hope of choice of possibilities.

The bullgod could feel it all ending his power his time waning that he and his had little time left here on this plane of existence. It was this feeling of end of flux of chaos that he felt a new chance a new world a new possibility. What awaited him and his in this new world he knew not only that this world was dead and dying and he needed it if he was to exist. For in the end like all things to exist was what mattered most, like all other things he fought to be not just to control to own to command but to BE!

So it was the voices of the abyss spoke to him told him how he and his would have a place to come and exist. That the end of his world was not the end, that they could continue on in their world. The bullgod took this offer without thought without hesitation if anything he took it in rashness that would haunt him. When they arrived his followers saw a new land and saw it to be good for it was familiar in fact it was exactly like home. The bullgod did not share their joy though for at once he could feel it before he could even see the new world the new home, his oubliette.

The new world was indeed close to the tear and was in fact very warm and very despoiled. The land grew only tough sinewy roots and plants. But it was also so very far north, in fact it was so far north that when the cold winds blew down in the cold seasons. They all but put out the heat of the tear. It was this cold combined with how few of the bullgod's followers that he had now made this his cage. The bullgod was a being of heat of extreme temperament his forge needed unending heat to create. The vast sea of followers was now reduced to nothing. A mere shadow of previous power.

So it is as it has come to pass that the bullgod escaped the end of the world. But now he is trapped to the north of the tear. Having neither enough of his followers or the power of the abyss due to

being too far from the tear, just close enough to survive. This combined with the bitter cold that comes down to torment him and ensure his binds are firm. The dawi Zharr have made their new home bound as they are. Time alone holds the means for them to come once again to the fore.

The Beginning of the End

by Gary Christopher Bomhoff

Corpse and bone littered the meadow around the watch tower as half empty mugs and comatose drunken revelers would a field the night after a harvest festival. As their wine would water the ground, so now did elven blood mix with the mud and torn up flowers. The forces of twilight had lain siege to the lonely watchtower on the eastern frontier for three days. The death toll was thirteen for the elves trapped within. The war banner of prince Korathil was torn, singed by fire, and stained by the blood of the elf bearing it, but still flying, still preventing their lost kin from fording the river beyond and striking at the city of Palatia four days away. Korathil himself was in the city with his host, unaware of the plight happening to his wardens.

Of the twilight kin, several dozen lay dead in the meadow, a silent festival of blood and death frozen for the night, the flowers and weeds torn up by the battle, the bodies now matted from the mud; A quiet drizzle still pervaded the area from a magical storm summoned earlier. Beyond their silent eyes, staring unblinking at nothing, were hundreds of living, breathing dark brothers and sisters who would kill the remaining eighteen Elves of the garrison. Eventually. This did not concern Syylar from his vantage point on the scorched battlements. He had resigned himself to death when the enemy had arrived. His only purpose in life now was to inflict enough casualties on the host of Twilight to blunt their future attack on Palatia. He would protect his family, no matter the cost. At least that had been his world for three days, until he'd seen Kore.

He'd thought his friend of youth long dead when he'd fled the burning remains of his family's estate almost eighty summers ago. To think that somehow Kore had fallen in with the servants of Twilight was something Syylar could never accept no matter what Kore had done. Forgiveness was as eternal as the rising of the sun for him. It was a fault pointed out by family and friends over the years, but he forgave them their lack of charity. People came far and wide to pry elves from their wealth and knowledge. It had made his kind secretive, aloof, and deadly in their own protection by necessity.

There had been no mistaking Kore leading a squad of Shadows attempting to penetrate the tower unseen in the rainy gloom, their armor no more than smudges of darkness on a muck covered canvas, except for the glint of silver spear and crossbow tip. Kore alone amongst them was not wearing a helmet, the better to rally his troops, the better for Syylar to see him. Several bowmen of the garrison had sent them skittering like beetles back into the darkness of the nearby wood, Kore unscathed, but one Shadow was still, a golden shaft embedded in the unfortunate man's left eye socket up to the azure fletching, the steel tip penetrating the back of the helmet. Death had been instantaneous.

He'd never thought to see Kore again. The fire had been an accident, a foolish mistake, and Kore had panicked and abandoned his young life, not even telling Syylar where he was going. Now, the young mage knew where his friend had went. At just over a hundred years old, Syylar and Kore were still young in the reckoning of elves, not even of age when Kore had run. Even at that age, Syylar's gift of magic had manifested itself. Kore and he had made a pact to be shield brothers; Kore would protect him with his sword, and Syylar would use his magic to protect them both. It was a grim reality now that all elves male or female, trained for war every season and were prepared to fight to the death for their home and families as their enemies multiplied and their own numbers dwindled through endless attrition. None of their plans had come to pass; Kore had fled before their first term of military service.

Syylar left the battlements, pulling his damp cloak closer about his shoulders. He was chilled to the bone from the rain, and smelled of wet dog. Bathing in the nearby Laris River was impossibility at the moment. He entered a world of flickering lights and the pungent aroma of fish oil that powered the lamps, mingling with the stench of rotting flesh and death as he passed by the wounded in the narrow stone stair, heading down to his private chamber. It was a rare luxury not shared by another elf in the tower. Sorcery required space and ritual. Tonight, that ritual would be a dream-meld. He took a lamp from the hall and used a fire stick to spread the light to his own lamps.

Some mages could light them with a snap of their fingers. Syylar was not one of them; That was just showing off and a waste of

power. He didn't care what people thought of him. He told himself this because he'd heard the grumbling of the garrison. They felt he was a disappointment, not pulling his weight, not showing off his powers, but only using them as a last resort. Like everyone else, the non-magical amongst elves expected fireballs and lightning bolts every hour on the hour. He forgave them, but it still made him angry.

Syylar's conjured localized rainstorm this afternoon had saved many lives in the tower when it caused the Twilight Kin's quarrels to not hit their mark, and the mud prevented their siege towers from crossing the meadow and killing them all with far less power than a single bolt of lightning would have cost him. They didn't care for him. Fine. The feeling was mutual. He'd always been different and he was already weary of their ignorance at his young age. Not that it mattered, they would all be dead soon, but at least Syylar had kept them alive a few extra days to blame him for not killing the enemy. He laughed bitterly at his dark thoughts. He hadn't always been this way, but a world of unrelenting darkness could break an elf as surely as it could anyone. He shed the cloak and his wet clothes. He told himself the world wasn't evil; Just the part of it he had been born into.

He settled down on his bed, pulling the heavy woolen blanket over himself. Everyone thought that elves were all silk sheets and diamond jewelry. That might be true in Palatia, or far away in Elvenhome, but not here in a cold and drafty watch tower. Dream-melds had a way of leaching the energy from a body and he would be grateful for the blanket's warmth later. This magic was only possible because of a primitive human ritual Kore and he had engaged in as boys that they'd learned from the children of transient human merchants from Basilea one summer. It was called "Blood Brothers." They had both made small cuts to their arms and pressed the wounds to together to mingle their blood and become in the Basilean understanding of the term, blood kin. Their parents had been horrified at such savage human rites, but the damage, such as it was, was done. Now Kore's blood was within Syylar and that had power in magic ritual.

A Dream-meld always required a link to allow the mage to enter the dreams of another, some small token that belonged to the individual, such as a ring or glove. Better was hair, and the best was

blood. All Syylar had to do was prepare the potion and add his own blood, and Kore's by default. He drank the bitter elixir in one nauseous gulp with his nose pinched shut for good measure, and settled down to sleep. When he dreamt tonight, if Kore did as well at the same time, they would share the same dream. Syylar's death might be eminent, but maybe he could bring his friend back from the darkness.

It took a little over an hour of waiting in his dream for Kore to appear. Syylar spent that time carefully constructing in his subconscious the Palatia of their youth, in particular the Estate of Kore's father, Hieros. Kore's mother had died in childbirth leaving Kore an only child, though there had been many human servants to keep him company. Syylar sat down at a small table on the second floor balcony where they had whiled the hours away playing cubes and crystals as boys.

His friend's appearance was sudden, as Kore appeared in the doorway. He gazed out in shock at the cityscape of Palatia, Korathil's Chrysanthemum Palace dominating the skyline. He stumbled over to the balcony and stared down at the city, moving past Syylar without even noticing him, such was the depth of his distress. Syylar looked away at the familiar sights of home, suddenly uncomfortable with his plan. They could not harm each other in this dream, and Kore knew enough about magic to know that.

"Kore," he said quietly, not getting up, afraid to meet his friend's gaze for a second.

The Kin of Twilight whirled on him. "You," he said, as though the word itself made him feel dirty. "I should have known you and your magic would be behind this," he finally said.

Syylar finally raised his eyes to his friend and found no welcome, only anger. "It's been eighty years. Are you still so angry?" Syylar asked. It made sense that Kore blamed him for the fire. One never looked to one's self in life-destroying moments. At least not the ones who turned and ran from such instances.

Kore turned to look out at the city. "Why have you brought me

here," he finally said. His voice was no more than a whisper.

"I'm part of the garrison of the tower, Kore."

The shadow said nothing for several moments. "Then you'll die."

"Yes. Neither of us can prevent that."

"Then release me back to my own dreams, dead man."

Syylar smiled bitterly at Kore's hurtful words, and replied with his own jab. "You don't like being in your father's house again?"

"You know I don't." Kore's voice was little more than a hoarse croak. The slightest rustling of drapes or scattering of the crystals on the game board in front of Syylar could have obscured the words entirely.

"It's because you're my blood brother that I could bring you to this dream," Syylar said, changing the subject. Insults would get him nowhere. He would return to the subject later. He needed to remind Kore that they were friends, and they could be again.

"Do you remember how your mother screamed at us when she saw our bloody arms locked together?" The question came unbidden from the Servant of Twilight.

"Yes." Syylar got up from the table to stand beside Kore against the marble bannister. "Lurida is well. She misses you."

Kore's face gave away nothing as he looked over at Syylar. "I find that doubtful."

"She worries whenever I'm called up for military duty, because I don't have my 'bloody brother' as she calls it, to guard me."

"It must be nice to still have a family," Kore replied coldly.

Syylar almost flinched at the words, as he realized the depths of his friend's misery. "Kore," he said, suddenly putting his hand on his friend's forearm. "Your father survived the fire. He's not dead."

Kore wrenched his arm from Syylar with such force that the mage staggered against the railing “You lie!” he shouted. “You always thought me a fool, no more than a well-trained guard dog to keep you safe.”

If this had been real he would have just provoked a killing rage in his friend. Syylar shook his head. “You’ve twisted your memories to suit your bitter, broken view of the world, Kore. Hieros still lives. The flames kissed his body, but the marks faded over the years and now one can barely see them.” It was the moment. He would make his move, and try to turn his friend from his cursed path. “You can go home, Kore, you can make amends with him. No one else at the garrison recognized you. No one in Palatia ever knew what happened to you.”

“I can’t do that, you know what my father’s like,” Kore said, storming back into the house. “He knows what happened is my fault and he won’t ever forgive me.” He lashed out, knocking a small end table over and shattering the crystal vase upon it, cracking it into a million pieces of amethyst snow. “I never had parents as understanding as yours.”

Syylar followed him into the dining hall where Kore raged, overturning chairs, and tearing tapestries from the walls, and he *knew*. Syylar knew. Kore was not refusing redemption. He was terrified that he might not get it and looking for excuses just like before. Syylar couldn’t let him run away again. “He’s already forgiven you Kore.”

Kore shook his head. “You can’t know that. Why did you have to bring me here?”

Syylar ignored the second question. “Every year on the spring equinox he invites my family to dine with him and we celebrate the beginning of harvest. Do you remember the Basileans Kyla and Lar? They have great grandchildren now, there’s almost a whole tribe of them living with Hieros. It took him many years to forgive you, but twelve years ago, he made us pour our first glass of last year’s spring wine onto the ground, and he said ‘This is an offering to Llanyr, god of travelers to keep my son safe wherever he may be.

May my own life be forfeit for his safety.'"

Kore looked stricken for just a second, before he turned away and laughed. "My father lies like a river flows, unendingly and eternally." The words spoke old bitterness and hollowness where Kore's pride should have been.

"You know that's not true."

"You never really knew him did you? To you he was just a sad old man. To me, I was the killer of the only woman he ever loved." Kore laughed, and shook his head. "You want me to go home to that? I'm better off with Twilight."

Syylar had heard this before, and there was no proof of it, only unfounded suspicions in Kore's mind. "He's given that offering and invocation to Llanyr every year since, Kore."

"Stop saying my name!" he suddenly screamed, whirling on Syylar. For a second, he thought that Kore meant to attack him. Then the anger left him and he staggered to the floor, his head in his hands. "I have new gods now, Llanyr is nothing to me. Celestia is closed to me."

"Megrati and Fentus." Syylar shivered slightly at the mention of Twilight's feminine and masculine aspects. "They have to kill you to take your soul Kore; Even gods forgive."

Kore nodded. "I swore an oath. I can't ever leave them. The priesthood won't allow it. I'll become a forgotten one."

Syylar couldn't think of anything to say about that, so he switched subjects. "Did you mean what you said, about being my dog?"

Kore laughed, an almost hysterical sound. "You've always been a narcissist, haven't you? Other people are just accessories to your existence, aren't they? Deep down, you know that's true, Syylar. You've always thought you were better than me."

Syylar squatted down to look his friend in the face, and just shook his head. "No. I never thought that for one second. I needed you

and when you abandoned me, I hated you for a long time. You didn't even tell me you were leaving." He could feel his anger long suppressed and supplanted by his bitter disappointment in everyone, and a shield that even Kore had mistaken for snobbery, slowly slipping away. It was quick, but Syylar leaned forward without warning, and slapped him across the face. "I would have went with you!" he shouted. "You didn't have to go alone."

For a moment, Kore was shocked, bringing his hand up to his cheek, then he looked away and said quietly, "I couldn't let you ruin your life to."

"You knew?" Syylar asked, incredulous.

"No, I thought my life was over and there was no point in destroying yours," Kore replied, reaching out to touch Syylar's forearm, where the scar from their Blood Brother ritual lay for a second, before dropping his hand. "It doesn't matter now, does it?"

Syylar shook his head. Things still mattered to him. That was why he'd brought Kore here. "We were both young and destroyed all the happiness we could have had together. But I cannot die knowing the darkness that is claiming you. For any feelings you may still have for me or your father Kore, turn from this path. Leave the Twilight, return home and warn your father of the danger coming to Palatia. You're of age, Kore, be a man. Stop being a servant of Twilight."

It was a long time until Kore spoke; "Redemption is just a fairy tale for human children, Syylar. I can never leave them."

"Then it's the beginning of the end for both of us," Syylar said sadly.

"The fire was the beginning, this is now the end. They mean to sack Palatia."

"I know, and every second we keep the Twilight here, we whittle their numbers down. Commander Valdizar knows the Twilight Kin, he knows they can't let a single one of our kind live." Syylar sat back on his haunches. "You're a scout Kore, you've got the skill to

get to Palatia and warn the Prince."

"Korathil still rules?" Kore smiled. "How old is he now?"

"He celebrated his five hundred and thirty-seventh year this summer. His daughter has been slowly assuming his duties for the last twenty-years. He still leads the army, he's not willing to risk Seriya dying on the battlefield before she's borne an heir."

"He always was a tough old bird wasn't he? Can he even mount Maelterax anymore?"

"Dragons live forever. Maelterax does most of the fighting, they just strap Korathil on tight."

Kore smiled, then whatever memory he was thinking of fled, taking the joy with it. "You're causing me pain keeping me here, Syylar. Please let me go," Kore whispered.

Syylar granted his friend's last wish and broke the Dream-meld. He knew that Kore's resolve was not so great as he thought. His friend just might take the brave course of action for once, and turn from the path of Twilight. He would see in the morning if his friend was leading the charge to storm the tower. His heart told him he would never set eyes on Kore again, that even now he was on his way to his father. His brain told him there was no hope, not for anyone here.

Dawn came eventually, heralded by a blast of warhorns, and the Twilight Kin advanced through the mud, the sky still overcast. The Altar of Megrati led the charge, two black and gold armored warriors standing on either side of the stone altar as dozens of filthy enslaved and emaciated Ratkin pulled the altar along. The eyes had been plucked from their skulls and silver head bands placed over their eyes to dissuade escape. They were no more than draft horses, robbed of their sentience and enslaved. The banners of Megrati blew in the breeze, and on the altar itself were the slaughtered limbs and heads of the fallen, some skeletal, others fresh and still festering. Impaled on a spike was the newest addition; Kore's head. His eyes had been gouged out, the tongue removed, and the ears cut away. A new bloody cloak of skin blew in the breeze on the back of

one of the altar guards, the other's skin cloak faded with age. It was the Twilight Kin's punishment for treachery.

Syylar closed his eyes for a moment and let the familiar pain of failure wash over him. Megrati cared little for traitors. Kore had been right. There was no redemption for him. He had betrayed his people and then betrayed those that took him in. Twilight Kin protected their own, and were as passionate in their defense as they were at punishment. This was all the world would know of him; a traitor twice over. At least he would give the elves of the garrison a show before they all died. When he opened his eyes, he unleashed light upon twilight. He put the crippled rat slaves out of their misery first. It was more an act of mercy than an attack. They didn't see the fire coming and death was quick.

In the end, there were simply too many of them, with mages of their own. Syylar followed Kore into death later that afternoon with the rest of the garrison, who died to the man protecting Syylar as he rained fire down upon the enemy. The Twilight Kin left nothing but blood, fire, madness, and death at the watch tower. They headed down river to give their bitter gift of vengeance to the people of Palatia, but they would have to get through Prince Korathil first, and they'd lost too many men to the Elvish mage. But Vengeance was a hungry beast and it was alive in the blood of the Elves and The Twilight Kin, and they would be in it's cold embrace until death.

The festival grounds were silent, the flowers trampled with blood, the participants sleeping on the ground, until vultures carried their flesh away and wild dogs battled over their bones. A month later, another detachment of Korathil's army arrived to repair and garrison the tower anew, awaiting the inevitable attack from the Twilight Kin in the now endless cycle of vengeance. Syylar's sister was amongst them. There was no forgiveness in her heart for Twilight, for what god had her brother's forgiveness done? Somewhere, some boy had lost his father in the battle for Palatia and he would never forgive the Elves. He would forge an army and soak it in blood at the ivory gates of the Chrysanthemum Palace. Eventually, it would fall, as did all things. Vengeance, once sated like all emotions, would await a new opportunity to seize a mortal vessel.

Hellfire

by Chris Davis

All is dark, quiet cold desolate dead. Nothing moves nothing stirs, for this is the quiet that comes before the awakening of fire.

A small body arises inside simple home of iron and brick. Just a cold dead empty nothingness, a simple abode to house a simple soul. The small frame dresses quickly into it's gothic stylized armor of black chased with brass. Once secure a gauntlet-clad hand reaches for a cruel looking long rifle with a wicked blade slung under the muzzle tip.

A few minutes latter the simple building is illuminated with a reddish orange glow. The test confirms all is in readiness and the daemonic infused cartridge is ensured of its spark. A few more test burns soon creates a dark char on the end of macabre looking rifle. A smell of hellfire soon wafts through the humble quarters. A lone figure departs the simple home, all in black chased with brass.

Many hours have passed, the small figure in the chased armor has met up with six other such clad figures all bearing daemonic looking rifles. Each rifle wafts a steady orange-red hued hellfire, the flames seem to pulse, as if the guns themselves wish to consume the very air around them. The figures are moving to their task for the day. A regiment of men with poleaxes, these men wish to hinder. They will be dealt with, hellfire will ensure this.

As the black armored figures approach the regiment of poleaxes they raise their fireglaives in unison. The rifles glow hotter almost as if the weapons can sense the intent to come. The hellfire goes from orange to red to a hideous white, so intense is the heat. As one the armored figures adjust dials on the guns, then at the exact moment of combustion, pull down on the firing levers of the exotic rifles.

Flames leaps from the fireglaives in such an intense eagerness to consume mortal flesh the first victims of the weapons do not cry out. For they are consumed too quickly to even utter a word. The others are not so lucky, soon the red hued orange hellfire is chasing

down the survivors.

Minutes latter the soil on which the poleaxe regiment had been, is now a charred ground of dirty earth with wisps of reddish-orange hellfire wicking up from the ground. Only this time the smell of hellfire has a tinge of sulphur and saltpeter.

The will of the dawi zharr, is that of hellfire. It will fuel itself, and it will burn that which opposes it.

Lord Draz-gah

by Ciaran Darcy

All was silent in the Great Hall as Lord Draz-gah completed his incantation. The assembled half-breeds stood motionless, great hammers at the ready. Around the gloomy rafters gargoyles flocked, hoping for scraps to feast on following the completion of the rite.

Ozone sparked and scents of brimstone filled the nostrils of those assembled. The Immortal Cohort, their armor darkened as always, faces hidden as always, stood in their customary silence as their lord uttered guttural and inhumane syllables.

It has been said that nothing lives within the armor of the Immortal Cohort. That if a warrior were to pierce the heart or remove the head of one, his essence is then redistributed amongst his fellow guard, each becoming stronger from the 'death ' of their fellow.

The Ironcaster continued chanting.

Toneless and dispassionate, the incantation was not one to bring hope to anyone, least of all the three captives shackled on their knees in the middle of the hall. The first was a lithe, thin elf maiden, her silver hair matted and tangled, tears traced lines through the grime on her face

She knelt, fearful and shaking, praying to whatever god she could for deliverance from what was to come. The second captive was an old man. His hair was shaved in the tonsure of a monk yet he had the build of a warrior. His robes were that of a senior member of his order, ornately trimmed with gold sigils now filthy and torn. Though he clearly had been viciously beaten he knelt erect, defiant, refusing to bow or show any weakness to his captors

The final captive was a dwarf. He had been shaven his beard had been cut.

Indeed his beard had been burned in the fire that was in the pit burning between the 3 captives. The dwarf appeared to be muttering something under his breath. The chanting tempo

increased. Faster and faster, the half breeds stamped their hooves and beat their armored chests to add to the cacophony, increased by the shrieking of the gargoyles.

Only the immortals remained unmoved. Three of their number broke ranks and moved to stand behind each prisoner. The dwarf captive raised his head high and in a low mournful voice began to sing.

The Ironcaster raised his arms up high as he shrieked the final syllables of the incantation. The trio of immortals raised their axes, and as one removed the heads of each of the captives.

Silence fell, broken only by the wingbeats of the gargoyles and the crackling of the fire

For a moment nothing happened.

Then the fire began to swirl and grow, becoming a pillar of flame.

From the flame stepped a figure. Tall and muscular, he wore only a loincloth. The flames flicked around him as he glided without walking to the dais Lord Draz-gah stood on. In an ancient, powerful evil voice he spoke.

"You have summoned me from the depths of the abyss; Speak, dwarf, lest I take your soul back to my master"

If the Ironcaster was intimidated by this he gave no sign.

“I have come into possession of the knowledge to free you and your master from your prison, yet the Lords of my order have forbidden this. In order to gain your freedom, I will need help from some of your brethren from the abyss."

The demon chuckled. "That seems a very noble offer dwarf, yet it seems very one-sided. What are your demands in return?"

"My demands are three, daemon: First, any slaves and treasure captured on this expedition belong to me; Second, I require accessed to the fabled library of your master in the Abyss; Finally, I

expect that once freed, you and your master will enter an alliance with me in order to cement my place on the obsidian throne.”

"You ask a lot little dwarf. For that, my master will expect some information before we set off."

The Ironcaster, for the first time, looked nervous. His eyes flicked around and he licked his lips.

"Well, dwarf?" The last words reverberated around the hall like a cannon explosion. The columns shook and from above came the shrieking of gargoyles.

Draz-gah ,his voice merely a whisper, uttered the following words:

"We need the heart of the Dragon"

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Barely a moon had passed since the ritual. The preparations had been frantic and secret: The Lords could never know.

As a result, Lord Draz-gah was forced to rely on a much smaller retinue than normal. They were mainly drawn from the half breeds and orcs that inhabited the blasted wastes near the stronghold.

He was uneasy at this; The orcs were unruly and unreliable at best of times, and the half breed’s battle lust meant that when their blood was up there was no controlling them. His one comfort came in the form of the Immortal Guard, standing implacable to his side.

These could be relied on absolutely.

With barely a nod to the captain he prepared for the march. As one the half breeds roared and began to march. The orcs, goaded by their packmaster’s whips, began their forced march as well.

The Immortals began hefted the palanquin onto their shoulders and followed suit. From the high crags a troupe of gargoyles unfurled tattered pinions and took flight, following the procession hoping for scraps from the anticipated slaughter to come.

***

Deep in the bowels of the abyss, Drech'yndak , Lord of the Brass Citadel, Wielder of the Vengeful Flame, the Scourge of Valentica, brooded on his throne.

His trusted lieutenant Kruz'nych relayed the information he had received from that pathetic Dwarf. He already knew that the key to his deliverance resided with the Dragon of Etstaz, the one the humans called Cadavo. The news the dwarf saw fit to share was no great shock to him.

Kruz'nych broke the silence.

"My lord, the dwarf and his meagre cohort are en route to the blasted craters; He will be expecting a response. Should I just kill him there and be free of his interference?"

Drech'yndak laughed; It was a low, mirthless laugh, with a measure of pity mixed in.

"Patience, Kruz'nych. The dwarf will find his death at our hands, but we need him. The 'heart' is but one of 3 treasures needed to free us. The Heart will bring us to them but only a mortal may use it's power."

"We need the dwarf to find the remaining treasures," Kruz'nych finished

"Exactly. Besides, why should we spend our energies breaking the barrier between worlds when that wretched dwarf can do it for us? I trust you to bring back the treasures. You may take a cohort equal to the dwarf."

The lieutenant went to leave before the demon lord spoke once more.

"And Kruz'nych?"

"Yes my Lord?" The efreet spoke distantly, as if making plans

already.

"We need the dwarf alive until the barrier is completely destroyed; Try keep him in one piece until then."

Reclamation Song

by Michael Grey

From Halpi's southern shores and the twin seas deep
To the north most mountains' snow top'd peaks
We go

When Winter's grip long releases land
Ours by lore and blood and hand
We go

'Reclamation Song' - Traditional dirge of the Free Clans

The green of the pastures was alive, almost livid in its brilliance, and only lightly edged with the russet of late summer. They rolled out to the north in swells of hillocks cut with ambling streams, dividing up the long haired cattle grazing across the closer meadows.

Jorrin had quickly lost himself in the sight. A vista he grew up believing he would never witness; lands lost to dwarfs fallen to the Abyss. He'd been taught that these mountains were gone, and he may as well wish to walk on one of the moons than the glens of northern Halpi. But yet here he was.

"Where are the trees?"

The words jarred him back to the present. One of the other dwarfs had asked the question, one of the other new settlers.

They were in a gallery on Dar Gaer's north face, looking down over the freshly reclaimed land. It was a tour of the hold, an aid to help the arrivals acclimatise to their new home. So far Jorrin had been impressed. From the skjalds recruiting settlers in the south and the caravans bringing fresh dwarfs over the passes, to the dormitories prepared for their arrival; everything about Dar Gaer had been organised in the kind of efficient detail usually associated with military campaigns. Only they were not here to destroy; they were here to build.

Word was Herse Baddon had plans to make Dar Gaer richer than Cwl Gen, more populous than Llynfanifeg. Jorrin's arrival was quickly making that second aim a reality, him and the forty other dwarfs in the gallery. And the tour was to help them get to work realizing the first.

"We keep 'em cut, lad. There's no less than five volcanoes along this range, and the land is too good to waste on timber," said their guide, an old warrior with a wooden leg carved in the shape of a rifle. He'd said he was there when Herse Baddon took Dar Gaer back from the fallen. A lot of the guides were. A reward for their heroism were safe, easy jobs away from the thunderous ironwatch gun line. With the merest hint of a prompt he would break into a tale of how one hall was taken from the fallen, or how he saw the Herse personally kill an Ironcaster in another.

It made the tour unexpectedly informative.

"Herse Baddon is not just quick with a blade," the guide went on. "He knows the hold'll get better returns on milk and meat than timber traded with the southern clans. Don't you worry, the Herse's got plans for Dar Gaer's future."

"Is that what these are for?" said Jorrin.

Everyone else followed his gaze. Behind them a line of cannon rested on a raised stone shelf. There were literally too many for him to count as the line followed the mountain's arc around and beyond site. The line faced out through holes carved through the bedrock, one for each cannon, overlooking the green valleys.

The guide snorted a phlegmy laugh. "Won't be needing them, don't go worrying yoursen. We carted a lot of them over the mountains with us. A damn lot of them, enough to crack a mountain, just in case that's what we needed to do. But the Herse got us in another way. Good thing he did, too, I wouldn't have liked to patch up the kind of holes they would have put in the walls, not when we were planning on staying."

"But why are they all here?" said Jorrin. He couldn't take his eyes from them. He'd never seen so much firepower in one place. It was

awesome in the most literal sense. It felt like the ordnance was waiting.

“Gotta keep ‘em somewhere, lad, and here is as good a place as any. We didn’t build this gallery, it was already here, carved when the hold was made before Winter. Seemed like the best place to put them.”

Jorrin looked back out over the fields to the north. As much as it seemed, those fields did not stretch on forever. Beyond his vision, hidden by the horizon and airborne snow teased from the mountain peaks, lay the lands of the fallen dwarfs. And he wondered if right then, another dwarf stood over a similar array of weaponry and looked south.

***

In vengeance for our fallen brethren
A song in our hearts, in our hands a weapon
We go

“Marn,” said the first dwarf.

“Rhyn Dufaris,” said the second. They clasped each other’s hand, their other on the other dwarf’s shoulder as they spoke their birth hold. There was no mention of clan; that had been forgotten. Now they were of Herse Baddon’s clan, of the hold Dar Gaer, but a dwarf could not forget where they were from. It framed them as much as their profession. And it was right and proper that when they met their new clan, their new family, they exchanged their birthplace along with their name.

The two dwarfs remained still for moment, then nodded and stepped apart.

Such little rituals were taking part across the vast dormitory. As new parties arrived from over the mountains, all coming to make a new life and extend the range of the free clans. Each dwarf came for their own reasons; the third son of a minor family with no inheritance, or evading a debt they could never hope to pay.

Or a shame, so base it could never be erased, only ran from.

“So why’re you here?” said Gruf to Jorrin.

Gruf had the bunk above Jorrin’s. She had arrived at the same time as him along with Medwyn and Cledwyn, the brothers with their oddly lilting accents from across the High Sea. As the youngest of the current arrivals they had fallen together.

Jorrin shrugged and looked everywhere but at Gruf or the brothers. Another two dwarfs gripped each other’s shoulders in front of him and exchanged hold names. The air filled with the thick scent of pine resin from the newly carpentered bunks. The wood looked fresh and had to have been brought from the south. The beds alone would have cost a fortune.

“Jorrin?”

He’d been avoiding answering, but accepted he couldn’t do that forever. “I needed a trade.”

“No jobs where you’re from?” Medwyn said.

“Not for me.”

“Why not?” said Cledwyn

“Foundling,” he said. He didn’t looked up to see to see the expression that would be on their faces.

“I’m sorry,” said Gruf. Medwyn punched his brother on the shoulder for asking the question.

“It’s not just that. Why I’m here. I mean,” he waved a hand towards the north wall. “*This*. Who could have thought we would have the chance to ever see these passes, let alone live in them.”

“I know what you mean,” said Gruf, and the faraway note in her voice told of sincerity.

“So what is your trade?” said Cledwyn, rubbing his arm.

Jorrin picked up an axe. “This,” he said. “Thirty years of service to Dar Gaer, and it’s as if I was born like anyone else.”

His reason for being there was not brought up again. As he’d intended. There were few taboos worse than being abandoned at birth, and no one would want to bring it up again, even here where all pasts were all forgiven.

Almost all.

***

armored mighty with weapons righteous
To reclaim our homes with anointed violence
We go

The birds this far north were fatter and more inclined to walk than those in the south. Just another of a myriad of details he had noticed since arriving. He watched one now as it waddled quickly, each footfall accompanied a soft hoot as it got out of the column’s path and into the underbrush.

“There’s bad eating on them,” said Gruf, catching where he was looking but not his thoughts.

“Quiet down the line!” shouted Thegn Uchdryd, Gruf had the good sense to shut up and keep marching. The Thegn wasn’t a bad sort, but he would not brook disorder of any kind in his ranks. The new recruits learnt in their first day as Dar Gaer’s new standing army.

They were marching through the high valleys north of the hold. The mighty peaks did not reach so high from this altitude and the air was noticeably thinner. Even so the pine forest persisted in the shaded basins between mounts, offering darkened thickets for anyone wishing to hide across the range.

The patrols were slowly stamping Herse Baddon’s rule down on his new holdings, ranging further and further from Dar Gaer.

“Not a thing,” said Gruf, quietly enough Thegn Uchdryd did not

hear. “Not a flame-damned thing.” Jorrin said nothing.

“Thegn Javag found a cave bear yesterday,” said Bradwen beside them. “On the eastern passes.”

“One bear to show for a month’s patrolling,” she replied. “Doesn’t seem worth it.”

Bradwen shrugged despite the massive hammer he rested on one shoulder. “Word is a giant had its lair across the plateaus hereabouts when the Herse took the hold. Could still be abroad.” He sniffed and drew one thick wrist across his nose.

“After the battle to take the hold it would have pissed off down the valleys. Eh, Jorrin?”

Jorrin was aware they were speaking, but the words didn’t register. He was looking up to the tantalisingly close peaks. In the thin atmosphere the sun picked out every detail, down to the individual snow drifts steadily piling in their depressions. Winter was coming. Winds that could freeze flesh from the bone and waves of snow deep enough to drown in would stop these patrols, and send anything in the valleys around Dar Gaer into hiding or hibernation. He might have to wait until next spring for death if something didn’t come soon.

“Jorrin, are you-?” Gruf began

“Stop!” The shout came from Thegn Uchdryd, but despite Gruf’s sudden silence it was not directed at her.

The Thegn’s hand was in the air, halting the regiment behind him. His eyes were on the tree-packed slopes either side of them. Not large enough to hide more than a few dozen dwarfs, but dark enough they just might.

Bradwen unshouldered his hammer and weighed it in his hands, Gruf pulled the axe from her belt and every dwarf wordlessly armed themselves.

Uchdryd remained with the hand up, head tilted back as if he

sniffed the air. Jorrin realised that nothing had moved within the trees to give away what had alerted the Thegn. Not even a sound. Not even, he realised, the sound the fat hooting birds.

“Shield wall!”

The automatic reaction of endless drills moved the dwarfs into a solid block of bodies. Jorrin stepped forward, overlapped his shield edge with Gruf’s to his right while his own was in turned overlapped from the left. He shook the shield hard, and when it would not move lowered himself to a half crouch and steeled his legs. He felt Bradwen’s heavy breath on the back of his neck as the big dwarf took his position between him and Gruf, ready to swing his hammer over and down onto anyone foolish enough to rush a war band prepared for violence.

Bradwen’s was the last movement as they stepped into position, and the clap of wood on iron died until the only sound was the whistling of wind over the peaks. Thegn Uchdryd still had not moved but his stare had settled on a patch of brush darker than the rest.

Jorrin’s heart thumped against his chest. He was surprised at that. This was the closest he had come to combat since arriving at Dar Gaer and he had thought he had come to peace with his decision. But here he was; prepared to face combat with a dry throat and sweat gathering across his brow.

Uchdryd still did not move. Jorrin, realising he was holding his breath, released it.

“What is it?” whispered Gruf.

Thunder filled the valley and Jorrin shook at the sound.

“Just an avalanche.” Bradwen laid a steadying hand on Jorrin’s shoulder as the noise boomed over them as unseen among the peaks snow thundered down a mountainside.

Jorrin shook his head, almost laughing at his nerves until the thicket Thegn Uchdryd focused on shifted. Undulations beneath the

leaves gave away something alive and moving. The leaves grew, moved up from the ground, and broke apart to reveal a dwarf in a green cloak coated in leaves.

“You’re learning,” said the dwarf to Uchdryd.

“Master Ranger,” said Uchdryd with a voice as cold as the mountain air. “I was not told you would be abroad today.” The Thegn lowered his hand but with the tensions still knotting his muscles Jorrin could not bring himself to relax, and when the entire thicket seemed to come alive he felt justified. But the massed movement coalesced into individual bushes, and then dwarfs disguised in brush-covered cloaks. They came forward, armed with well-used blades and wicked-looking crossbows, and the look of dwarfs who knew exactly how lethal they were. They came forward in a loose formation, and Jorrin saw his own regiment was now covered from the front, left and right without them noticing.

The one Thegn Uchdryd referred to as master ranger rested his arms across the head of a long-handled axe. “Oh, I wasn’t. I have been abroad for two weeks.”

“You’re returning?” said Uchdryd, his one question stood in for many.

The Ranger’s answer was to look behind him down the valley. Dusk was gathering and in high-sided valley dark came quickly. “Aye. And none too soon.”

Uchdryd moved forward to join the Ranger looking down the swiftly darkening valley. When he spoke the words were intended for the Ranger alone, but a Thegn’s voice is used to being heard over the clamour of war and carried easily on the fresh mountain air. “What news?”

“I shall report to the Herse, you will hear it then.”

“Flame take it, I’m here now.”

The Ranger thought for a moment and said in a quieter voice, “The fallen gather. They want Dar Gaer back.”

Uchdryd accepted the answer with a fatalistic nod. “How long?”

“They won’t muster before the first snow falls, so if they behave like a proper army they will wait for the spring. But when have the fallen ever acted like a proper army?”

Jorrin felt something harden inside him. *This* was why he was here. Dar Gaer was to be his death, and he would prefer it to come sooner.

***

Fathers and mothers long since gone
Began our paths on days since dawned
We go

Mea’n Fo’mhar had always been, while not melancholy, tacitly dismal for Jorrin in a way that went beyond the celebration’s mournful providence. The observance of autumn turning to winter was to honour the passing of those in the past year, and for those whose end may come in the impending winter. It was a vestige from the time when winter carried darker connotations, when a dwarf may not live to see the thaw.

While time had dulled the Fo’mhar’s sombre edge and a certain note of revelry had crept into the gathering, the night’s activity still revolved around the toasting of lost friends and the singing of their songs.

For this, the first Mea’n Fo’mhar since Dar Gaer’s reclaiming back into the roll of the free clans’ holds, Herse Baddon had laid down a fine feast. Of the dwarfs who filled Dar Gaer’s feasting hall, over half were members of the Herse’s army who fought in the hold’s capture from the fallen. They had all lost friends and family, often in ways which left no body to honour, and that night was their goodbye.

They had composed and practiced the songs of their lost over the past year, and now the hall filled with their lives put to lyrics. One dwarf would stand on their table, announce the name and father-

hold of the deceased before beginning the liturginous rhythm of their life. The assembled dwarfs would listen solemnly to begin with, cheering as the song moved through heroic deeds and sad losses, shouting to add details as the singer wound on. Until, as the stanzas reached their denouement and the cadence increased and was accompanied by the beating of fists and tankards on the pine tables, the dwarf's final battles and their death was retold, the wailing and cheers reached a point where nothing should be heard over them; all would go silent. And the last breath of the dwarf was sung, and the singer would lower their head. Prayers would be muttered beneath breaths, and finally an almighty cheer would erupt for an honourable death. Then the singer would step down from the table to applause and the clapping of hands on shoulders, and another would take their place.

Gruf, Medwyn and Cledwyn were enthusiastically thumping their tankards on the table in time with the death story someone they never knew. The singer had woven a recognisable chorus into the narrative of the dwarf's blithe attitude to mortal danger, and the listeners were joining in loudly and increasingly out of tune.

Jorrin didn't join in. He sat beside his friends, his own tankard stayed still in his hands, while he looked up toward the head table.

Herse Baddon sat there, in his place as Lord of the hold. In any event it would be hard for the eye not to be drawn to the Herse. The flame red pigment dyed into his already angry russet hair had become almost permanent over decades, and he was almost as tall as a man. He wore his famous fur cloak, made from the hide of a cave bear the Herse had strangled with his bare hands. Usually such a tale would be an acceptable exaggeration, and it would be tacitly accepted that the axe wounds it took to fell animal would have been tailored out of the hide. But in Herse Baddon's case dozens of dwarfs in the hall at the moment had witnessed it, and would tell anyone who asked of how the Herse had battered down the bear with his fists before choking the beast with an arm lock.

Looking at the Herse's shoulders and arms Jorrin had no doubt at the story's' authenticity.

But that was not why Jorrin was looking at the table, it was who

the Herse was speaking to.

Alongside the Lord of the hall and his Thegns was the dwarf Thegn Uchdryd had called master ranger.

He and the Herse leant in together as they spoke, as did the older Thegns. The ranger had been speaking at length for some time, interrupted rarely by the Herse or a Thegn, and Jorrin wished he could hear what was said.

"That's Rhun," said Medwyn. He'd seen where Jorrin's attention was and tipped his tankard towards the table. "He's Baddon's lead ranger. Supposed to be leader of the army as much as the Herse is."

"Why haven't we seen him before?" said Jorrin without taking his eyes from the table. Whatever the ranger was saying it was for the Herse and Thegns as a whole, and it held their entire attention regardless of the heat, noise and movement filling the hall to uncomfortable levels.

"*We* have," said Cledwyn. "He came by the upper north battery a month ago. The battery up there is one of the original defences from when the hold was first built, it had mostly collapsed, was filled with rubble, snow and mountain goat shit. Thegn Hepti had most of the engineers, us included, in there clearing it out and shoring the roof ready to be re-used. We'd been there most of a week when Rhun marched in one day. He must have come right in from one his patrols, he still had snow on his shoulders and carried that axe of his, and for a while I thought he might use it on the Thegn."

"He'd arrived back and heard about Hepti's plan for the battery," Medwyn picked up. "He tore right through the Thegn. Called him an idiot and a half-breed and demanded to know if the Thegn's mother had dropped him on his head at birth, and a few other things not nearly as polite. Seems our master ranger had taken full stock of the hold's defences after the Herse'd taken it and had said to leave that battery alone, said it'd been built to defend against a pass no longer there after a god had fallen into it or something, but Hepti had liked the look of it and though he might name it after himself. Rhun didn't like it. Seems like the no-nonsense sort, and

he wanted us engineers put to better use elsewhere."

"Did the Thegn do what he said?" said Jorrin.

Medwyn pointed. "You see old Hepti up there anywhere?"

Jorrin didn't. It seemed the Ranger had the authority the twins hinted at.

"Word is Hepti's been moved to overseeing the kitchens. Somewhere where if he decides to start naming stuff after himself it won't put the hold in danger," said Cledwyn. He pulled the leg from a cooked goose on the table and spoke around the meat as he ate. "But other than that we haven't seen him either. Spends most of his time ranging north down to River Trag and… further."

Into Tragar Jorrin silently filled in the words Medwyn was unwilling to say.

It appeared the Master Ranger had stolen into the lands of the fallen dwarfs and their Abyssal fiends, and what news he had brought back to the hold was enough to distract the Herse and all his Thegns.

Jorrin wondered what it was like across the Trag River, in the lands slave to the sway of the Abyss. He could go, he knew. He could just leave the hold and walk north; keep walking until his legs gave way from thirst or hunger, or he was taken off them by some beast his education had not equipped him to accurately describe. Either way would mean death, and that was why he had come to Dar Gaer; the hold at the edge of the world.

Yes, it would be death, but he knew he did not have the courage to do that. For him would be the death in battle; more cowardly and loaded with honour he did not deserve. But that was all he could manage, and he hoped when Hwel judged him she would take his manner of death into account.

***

Sons of the Trag can no more stand

The armored wrath of a thousand hands
We go

Winter came early this far north. It pressed onto the mountains and seemed to shrink the world into the few passes around the hold. It was only the glimpse of distant peaks, visible only by their iced edges beneath the low dark clouds which gave away the world had not disappeared under another Winter.

Deeper into the season sound had a flatter quality once snow began to eat the passes, piling up the valley sides until not a sliver of bare rock could be seen anywhere along the range. On patrol Thegn Uchdryd's orders were shortened in the frigid air, turning into puffs of steam and dissipating quickly. What were in the autumn hard-pushed but uncomplicated marches turned into almost impossible slogs through drifts higher than the tallest dwarf. The hold's few fire priests were perpetually busy to the south, keeping the main thoroughfares open for the few pack wagons still coming up from the southern holds.

This left the patrols to make do as they could. Jorrin and the rest of his regiment were using shields to pat down light snow, making it something harder they could walk over, while behind them the soft fall slowly covered and undid their path, making their return journey as difficult as their outward.

"Flame. Damn. This." Gruf spoke between hard breaths as she stamped her shield over the snow. "Why. Do we. Have to do. This."

"You'll sink into the drifts otherwise," said Bradwen behind them. The big dwarf stood a few inches lower than usual, his vast weight enough to force him into the shield-packed snow.

"Not that, idiot. Why are we even patrolling." Jorrin smiled at the exchange. Gruf didn't mean insult by the words, it was just banter between people who had spent long hours together and still enjoyed each other's company.

"Patrolling's what we do. We are the shield of the hold," said

Bradwen, reciting the oath they had all spoken on taking up arms for Dar Gaer.

“Right now I think the snow is more defence than we could ever be.” Gruf stepped into the newly-packed snow and began batting down the next drift.

“Because we’re not out here alone,” said Jorrin.

Gruf and Bradwen stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him. “How do you mean?” said Bradwen.

“Herse Baddon has had rangers moving into Tragar. That’s what the Master Ranger said.” He continued when Gruf and Bradwen looked at him with questioning expressions.

“How do you hear that?” said Gruf.

“When he scared Thegn Uchdryd on that patrol.”

“I didn’t hear that.” Gruf gave a questioning expression to Bradwen who shook his head.

“I thought everyone heard.”

“He didn’t come within twenty paces of us,” said Bradwen.

Jorrin didn’t know what to say to that, so said nothing. He began to think on that, on how the words which were so clear to him, so clear he just assumed everyone else heard, when he was interrupted by the deadened heavy thump of snow on snow.

Ahead of them a coppice of fir trees grew from the snow crust. Their branches brushed the drifts piled up against the thicket and in patches the snow bringing the branches low slewed off where something disturbed them.

Jorrin had been told by other dwarfs more used to the harsher northern climate that while outside his beard might burn his skin where it touched, inside such a copse might be warm, insulated by the same snow which could kill outside.

A coppice that size, he thought, could hold much more than one person.

As if vitalised by the thought the lower branches shook powerfully enough to create a localised snowstorm. The cold had worked its way into the dwarfs' bodies and minds and they were slow to react to the sudden movement only thirty yards away, even Thegn Uchdryd, who's order to "Form ranks!" came belatedly and weak.

While they were still moving into position the branches burst open. Jorrin still had not locked his shield with Gruf when, out from the powder white mound, dwarf rangers erupted into the open in a headlong run. It became quickly obvious the rangers did not know the patrol was there.

The last ranger cleared the trees helping another dwarf limp as fast as he could, and looked up. Jorrin recognised Rhun and, even at the distance, the expression that came to his face as he saw the battle line was, while not relief, the welcome acceptance of a change in tactical potential.

"Form up!" he bellowed. Even as the master ranger struggled through snow with a wounded comrade his order reached into the training of every dwarf there. Jorrin felt his shield rattle as his neighbours tested the wall.

He watched the master ranger and his injured comrade push through the snow, making painfully slow progress towards the regiment's line. The other rangers had already reached them and swept around beyond Jorrin's sight. Only Rhun and the last ranger was left when the small wood they emerged from exploded outward in a cloud of snow, bark and sap.

What burst from the trees was something direct from the realm of tales told to frighten children. Tales made real in the snow, tales made tangible by size and tusk and blade.

"Orc." Jorrin didn't know who said it, but the word was loaded equally by disbelief and alarm.

It was not only that he looked upon beasts he knew existed but never expected to see, but that there were so many - they nigh poured from the copse as if their bodies alone held up the branches.

They bounded over the snow at a speed no creature that size should be capable of, grunting heavy breaths to hang in the cold air. Within a beat they were upon Rhun and the ranger. The lead orc leapt, swung a rusted blade above its head, and brought it down. The blade took the injured ranger between the shoulders. The dwarf arched back, opening his mouth as if to scream but releasing only a spray of blood, shockingly red in the white landscape.

Rhun was almost dragged down with the sudden deadweight, but managed to hold his feet. Jorrin's last view of the master ranger was of him twisting to face the orc, unslinging his axe as he turned and putting the momentum into the inception of a swing. And then the master ranger was gone, lost behind the incoming horde of green-skinned monstrosities.

"Prepare yourselves!" shouted Thegn Uchdryd.

The dwarf line drew together, bonding with muscle and iron. The orcs were almost upon them, their blind charge made no less threatening for its ragged line. They howled as they came, the only noise in the winter-deadened valley.

And the dwarfs prepared to meet them.

The orcs crashed into the shield wall. Jorrin's shield was slammed into him and his feet were forced backwards in the snow. But he held; the whole wall held. The orcs howled, but now it was the dwarf's turn.
"Second rank!" came Thegn Uchdryd's voice. The orc face baying its animal cry over the lip of Jorrin's shield suddenly disappeared, smashed from above by Bradwen's enormous hammer. It was immediately replaced by another. This beast tried to hook Jorrin's shield. Jorrin felt the air displace by his ear and Bradwen brought his hammer down expertly beside his head and onto the orc's crown with a wet crunch.

"First rank," shouted Thegn Uchdryd, picking up volume as it

warmed, “Heave!”

As one the dwarfs along the wall’s leading edge put their shoulders to their shields and in time gave one almighty shove. For all their mass the orcs were not prepared for the thrust, and the unexpected force staggered them. Still in time, the dwarfs unlocked their shields and, as one, hacked into the orcs.

Jorrin’s own axe bit into the skull of the beast before him, and felt the satisfying *thunk* as the blade bit into the skull to two fingers deep, but even then he knew he had merely stunned it. It reached up, trying to bat away his arm, but he was already bringing it back and locking his shield in place once more. As the wall reformed he had a glimpsed of the orc trying to stand only to be trampled from behind by another trying to get at the dwarven line. His shield shook as the orcs clashed back in place, filling his world with pressure and the noise of battle.

“Second rank!” shouted Thegn Uchrdyd. Once again Bradwen’s hammer came down, and once more orcs died, and the cycle continued. The Thegn would call the command and Jorrin would open his shield, slice into the orc presented to him, and then he would relock the shield for Bradwen to do his bloody work. His shoulders burned and his thighs felt to always be on the verge of collapse, but he was dimly aware of the lessening pressure beyond his shield and the blood-blackened snow underfoot as they made progress forward.

They were winning, and the realisation invigorated him.

“No!” In the workmanlike way the dwarves had taken death to the orcs it was the first voice Jorrin had heard other than the Thegn’s. It came from Jorrin’s left, and he risked a brief glance to see a curved blade hook one shield. The orc holding the knife was brought down by a hammer, brought from the second rank as Bradwen did behind himself, and with the same effect. But the orcs Bradwen brought down had not hooked a blade over a shield. The hammer blow struck the orc down, and it took its blade with it, along with the shield.

The tension left the shield wall immediately as three spears came

through the sudden gap. The dwarf who had held the shield was pierced through the chest. He convulsed and spewed blood, but in the press his body could not drop and he stayed upright, vomited blood running over his mail.

A blow struck Jorrin's shield. Moments before when the shield wall was held by the strength of twenty dwarfs he would have barely felt it, now it was only what strength he had left the impact was vicious, sending the shield into his and jarring his arm numb.

The ordered battleline crumbled as the dwarfs stepped apart, giving themselves room against an enemy who desperately fought to be amongst them. The orc that came for Jorrin was not the largest of its kind, but each strike it made came down from its greater height and all Jorrin could do was raise his shield to fend them off.

The rusted blade came down again and again, *thud! thud! thud!* each impact strong enough to dislocate his arm if he did not meet it correctly. Instinct made him retreat but almost immediately his back met another frantically moving body, his only indication it was friendly was the lack of blade through his spine.

Instead he circled, making the most of the limited space. The blows came down in such a flurry he had no time to think, only react, and it was with more than a little surprise he realised he was defending himself.

This was why he had come to the end of the world; to seek out battle and the death he was too cowardly to give himself.

Wasn't it?

It had been.

Over the weeks of trudging over the mountains he'd accepted that his shame was one he could never make amends for, and that an honourable death was more than he deserved.

But, perhaps, an honourable life could go some way to make some atonement. After all, death came to everyone eventually.

The decision arrived with another blow to Jorrin's shield and with the strength of resolve he swept his shield aside. Unexpected movement took the orc's blade and arm with it. Whatever expression the beast had it lasted only long enough for Jorrin to throw himself forward, bring his axe around and down, and cleave the orc's face in two.

The scream in Jorrin's ears was his own; a heady mixture of anger, joy and the possibilities of a continued existence. He laughed, hurled himself at another orc. His axe sliced into the beast's ribs extracting a bull-like bellow that Jorrin silenced by climbing its flank and bringing his blade to its throat.

He jumped clear of the felled creature and bounded for the next. He became movement, violence, the bringer of death to these spawns of a bygone age who dared walk his people's' mountains. He carved his own kingdom amid the battle where any orc who entered it was welcomed with blades and a screamed oath that it would be ended.

And then there were no more. Jorrin could not remember how or when but his shield was gone, instead he held a second axe in his shield hand. Both dripped an ichorous fluid steaming in the cold air.

Around him the snow stained with the same black fluid and orc bodies. Each one had died hard under multiple wounds he only had the vague notion came from his axes. Beyond that circle were more orc bodies, but intermingled with those of dwarfs.

He looked around quickly, searching for Gruf and Bradwen in the survivors, but turned into the face of Master Ranger Rhun.

"What's your name, dwarf?"

Jorrin's brow furrowed under the exhausted uncertainty that he had seen the master ranger die under a pile of orc. "I asked your name," he said again.

"Jorrin," he said, too tired to remember the 'sir'.

Rhun nodded as if he already knew, rested his axe on his shoulder and with his other hand dragged a sack across the ground as he walked by. He looked about at the fallen dwarfs. Perhaps a third of the regiment lay among the dead, dotted here and there with the dwarfs in green ranger's cloaks. "We leave now," Rhun said loud enough everyone could hear. "Gather your fallen. We'll take them on their cloaks. Two dwarfs to a cloak, and don't waste any time. It will be dark soon, and there'll be time enough to mourn after we return."

"Sir, where's Thegn Uchdryd?" someone asked. Jorrin nearly sagged when he saw it was Gruf, with Bradwen behind as her shadow.

Rhun pointed to a dwarf face down beneath an orc body. "The Thegn fought well, but he needs you for his final journey home."

Home thought Jorrin, and despite all the death that lay around him could have smiled for the warm connotations the word now evoked within him.

***

Tho' age be-slows us
Duty demands us
We go

Herse Baddon's anger was a sight to behold. The Lord of the Dar Gaer burst from his throne and seemed to ready to kill anyone foolish enough to walk within arm's reach. However the closest person was the master ranger, and the Herse relented to punching the granite throne. The stone seat, already old when the God War began, cracked under the blow but seemed to exhaust some of the Herse's rage.

Rhun had described how he had tracked a band of orcs as they crossed the Trag river and scouted into Dar Gaer's territory. How the orcs met with others already in the mountains, and became so numerous that the rangers' presence had been discovered through the sheer number of them moving freely through the lower valleys. He told of the ranger's flight, and of their chance encounter with

the patrol.

It was the recounting of Thegn Uchdryd's death which prompted Herse Baddon to unleash his legendary temper. As he stood there breathing hard the stone backing split, then sheared and slipped onto the hall floor with a crash which sounded around the great hall. The echo died, replaced the by the Herse's deep, regular breaths.

"They are just orcs," the Herse said without turning from the throne.

"For now," said Rhun. "But we know these are only the scouts. *They* shall come."

The Herse paced before his throne. "I did not retake Dar Gaer just to lose it again."

"They want it back." Rhun spoke matter of factly. "We knew this time would come."

The Herse stopped pacing and considered Rhun's words. "Yes, we did." He turned and looked behind the master ranger where the survivor of the regiment stood to attention. His mood shifted; the rage wasn't gone, not entirely. From the few times Jorrin had seen the Herse he believed anger was the foundation of his soul. But it was joined by the kind of wicked enthusiasm which was only not called malevolence because he was dwarf, and by definition on the side of good. "And with such dwarfs at my side they can send all the hell spawn they like, and we shall send them back to the pit they crawled from."

The dwarfs cheered their readiness. Jorrin felt inflated and plated in armor. He believed everything the Herse said. For he was Herse Baddon; Champion of all the Free Clans and Lord of Dar Gaer. With the Herse leading them Jorrin knew they could withstand anything.

***

From Halpi's southern shores and the twin seas deep
To the north most mountains' snow top'd peaks

We go

When Winter's grip long releases land
Ours by lore and blood and hand
We go

'Reclamation Song' - Traditional dirge of the Free Clans

"What's that?"

"Mh?" said Jorrin.

"What's that you're humming," said Gruf.

Jorrin hadn't realise he had been. In the mental torpor of drawn-out waiting his mind had gone back to his Song.

He'd composed his Song before coming to Dar Gaer, and had left it where someone would find it to sing at the Mea'n Fo'mhar after his death. It was less a song than an apology put to lyrics. He'd made it short for the sake of the unknown dwarf who would have to sing it after he was gone, and ended with a request for forgiveness for what he had done.

After their return from the fight with the orcs he had taken the scroll and burned it, and lay awake late into the nights since making up his new Song, one still of remorse but also of atonement and hope. And in the drowse-inducing march he had unconsciously slipped into its recital.

"Nothing," he said, but with half a smile. Gruf gave him an odd look but didn't say anything else.

The look was understandable; the entire hold was going to war. Around them hundreds of dwarfs had marched to the tempered sounds of war horns, precisely timed so the host would not march in time and risk avalanches from the surrounding peaks.

Their regiment was honoured to rank up behind the veterans who had won the hold with Herse Baddon; recognition for being the only freshly made Dar Gaer regiment to see battle. Jorrin

recognised his guide from his first week, the old dwarf with a leg carved in the shape of a rifle, identical to the Ironwatch rifle he now carried on his shoulder. When the old dwarf had seen Jorrin looking he'd given a nod in respect to a fellow warrior.

It was an odd feeling, being among a warhost of such size. Flanking the column were brock cavalry, so many Jorrin could smell their musky faecal stink from fifty paces. More moved unseen among the peaks, protecting their flanks and scouting the way with Rhun's rangers.

Yet more pulled the drafts and wagons behind, bringing up the hold's ordnance batteries. Cledwyn told him they had emptied Dar Gaer of two whole galleries of its cannon. More than the Herse had brought across the mountains to take Dar Gaer.

What the Herse had taken to crack open a mountain they were taking now to crack an army.

May the flame help them, Jorrin thought.

The march had taken almost the entire day. They had begun shortly after midnight and marched down the passes watching the sun make its low, early winter arc across the sky, setting again while they still moved, fuelled by the Herse's impatience to end the threat to the hold before it could take root.

The enemy, the scouts told them, gathered at the other end of the valley. An unseasonal fog blanketed the ground, but in the patchy starlight he could see the heads of soldiers ranked up within it, waiting for the fog to shift.

The enemy. Dwarfs lost to the Abyss. The fallen.

They may have forsaken their people, but they were still dwarfs. Jorrin would not say, but in a way he felt he may understand them. No dwarf was born to the Abyss, they fell to it through weakness in character, and acting upon the urges brought by that weakness.

He had almost done just that. He liked to think it was some remaining shred of principle which would not allow him to give

credence to the possibility his fate may lay with the fallen, but he knew he just afraid.

But he had made his decision, and he would make amends by facing them. He felt exhilarated, freed. He would fight and win or he would die, and either would ease his soul when he met Hwel. He weighed the two axes he now carried in place of his shield. They felt comfortable, as if they were always meant to be there.

“Easy, killer,” said Bradwen. “There’ll be time for that soon enough.”

Jorrin grinned. He was looking forward using his weapons again. In defence of the hold and of his friends, he would use them to good effect.

At the army’s head Herse Baddon shifted impatiently on his brock. Jorrin understood the Herse’s restlessness. The moment the rangers’ reports of the gathering fallen army reached Dar Gaer he had roused the entire hold and swept down the valley to stamp down the threat swiftly, and the snow choking the passes be damned.

But they had been waiting for almost an hour since the battle lines had been drawn, and the fog refused to disperse and the fallen across the valley had not moved. With so few dwarfs living in Dar Gaer Herse Baddon was reluctant to send them to face an unknown number of enemy, or risk blind cannon fire.

So they waited. Thegns came to the Herse, gave reports, and returned to their regiments, dwarfs relieved themselves on the snow, Gruf tested her shield, and Jorrin recited his Song within his head.

“Either of you been this far north before?” said Bradwen, breaking the silence.

Gruf shook her head. “No, why?” said Jorrin.

Bradwen pointed forward. “This fog. Don’t seem like it should be around this time of year.”

“It shouldn’t,” said another dwarf. His accent had the deep, extended vowels of the northern holds and gave his words credence. “It’s too damn cold. Any moisture should be frozen from t’air.”

Jorrin’s suspicions rose. The enemy, visible as feint outlines across the valley floor, still had not moved, but their stationary forms now held a sinister quality which their silence only added to.

Herse Baddon’s brock pawed at the ground and huffed, emitting a cloud of breath to drift over the warriors in a predator’s meat stink. The breeze which took the breath picked up, and the cloud before the army began to shift.

Everyone saw it, and calls went to up to pick up arms across the lines. The air, until then filled with nothing but snatches of low conversation and the clink of leather on armor, suddenly picked up with hundreds of dwarfs arming themselves.

Jorrin just looked forward. Something wasn’t right. The fog whorled and shifted, but he figures opposite them were as unmoving as the past hour. Even as the mist was teased by the growing wind, thinning out and revealing the ground between the two armies, the only movement came from Dar Gaer’s lines.

The Herse noted it too. He leaned forward in his mount, as if the extra few inches would reveal what caused his unease.

Then the cloud cover blew clear of the moon and moonlight bathed the valley.

They were not facing an army of fallen dwarfs. They were not even facing an army.

Across the valley floor stood hundreds of mounds, made of piled stone or snow, stacked in the vague height and shape of dwarfs with branches leant against many of them to give the outline of spears.

The figures in front of those sticks had been driven into the ground,

each holding up the severed head of a dwarf wearing the green hood of Rhun's rangers.

The Herse said nothing. He didn't have to. Jorrin could feel the rage radiating from him like waves of frightening heat.

Every other dwarf had now also seen what faced them, and their eyes along with their fear, shifted to the Herse and what he would do next.

Herse Baddon walked his brock forward. The beast growled its displeasure and shook its massive head, but consented to be moved, and the Herse wordless looked down on the line of heads.

"Who are they?" he said.

Rhun walked from the front line to stand with his Herse. "Thegn Haur. He and his dwarfs were guarding the western passes."

"The western passes," Herse Baddon said. The words carried more than the spoken statement.

"That's right."

"The reservoirs!" the Herse shouted, and brought his brock around. Rhun was already running back to his line, frantically making the silent signals his rangers used in place of spoken order.

"Reform!" the Herse shouted. "Back to the hold!"

The entire army turned and began the hard slog through uphill snow. The Herse was joined by the rest of the brocks and swept past the infantry in a thunderous gallop. They would reach the hold first, but it would already be too late.

***

In ages past, heroes strong in the hero's caste
Led armies not since amassed
We go

The rangers killed as a distraction at the mountain's base had their bodies thrown into Dar Gaer's three reservoirs. Not that it made any difference. The water had been poisoned, and beyond the skill of the hold's fire priests to counter.

They tried vaporizing the water; boiling it and collecting the purified runoff, but to no avail. Whatever the fallen had infected the water with was infused into it thoroughly. When all else failed the fire priests began praying; the universal sign that nothing they could do would help.

While they worked on saving the hold's water supply the enemy worked also. The first sign the southern passes had been blocked was the cessation of supply wagons. The second was the body of the messenger sent to find out why the wagons were late, bisected and pinned to the only carriageway south, a thin dusting of hoar frost covering his naked skin.

Then, winter struck.

What the southern dwarfs had thought was winter - the heaving falls of snow coating the world in shades of white as far as the mountains would allow - was nothing more than a prelude to the ferocious battering the northern Halpis received each year.

Snow filled valleys, reaching almost to the battery windows, required teams of dwarfs to venture outside and dig down the piles. But along with the snow came a temperature drop so harsh uncovered skin froze and split. Dozens of dwarfs were lost as they stepped onto what looked like hard packed snow, only to fall through soft powder into chambers tens of feet deep and freeze to death before they could be dug out.

Some were simply lost; wandering mere yards from their comrades only to lose themselves in sudden snow squalls and wander off away from the hold never to be seen again. Lost, presumably, as the rangers sent to scout the passes and surrounding mountains to try and sight the enemy everyone knew to be out there. Most of those scouts never returned, and those who had did so without once seeing any sign of the fallen in the vicious blizzards which now choked all hope of aid from the south.

They were losing warriors hand over fist, and the enemy had yet to show themselves.

And even then, dwarfs still fell sick from the poisoned water.

Bradwen was one of them.

Jorrin stood over Bradwen's cot, holding a bowl of melted ice for Gruf to rinse the cloth and clean his friend's brow, but Gruf had laid her head on the cot's frame and was sobbing silently.

Whatever unhallowed poison the fallen had infected the reservoirs with it acted quickly on a body once it took hold, voiding the stomach and bowels and leaving the dwarf in excruciating cramps for days. If the fallen had wanted to simply kill their victims they could have done so. This suffering was deliberate. By Gruf's reaction he could only assume the secondary effect of the prolonged shock on the survivors was also by intention.

He had not realised that at some point in their months together Gruf and Bradwen had become more than friends. He wondered if this was why Bradwen's sickness was affecting her more than him. Bradwen's once mighty frame had withered. Now his cheeks sunk until his cheekbones stood out like mountain peaks, his beard was patchy and between the greying bristles the skin was a grey mottle of mortification. He had slipped into merciful unconsciousness, safe from the pain and of Gruf's weeping.

Bradwen was not alone. The vast reserves of coal and firewood was repurposed to melt ice from the glaciers, leaving the hold to slowly descend to freezing temperatures. Ice began to sheen across corridor walls, dwarfs began to cluster around the few fires permitted to burn, and to sleep fully clothed.

Even so, the poison seemed to seep into foodstuffs. It struck capriciously and without apparent method. An entire table of dwarfs might eat the same meal, only for two at either end of the table to be struck down. Or one, or none. The result was an uncertainty which leached into the group conscious of the slowly

dwindling dwarfs. The survivors began to look upon their fellows, silently wondering whom might be next, and what, if anything, they could do to make sure it was not them.

At some point that night Bradwen died, never having been able to face the enemy who killed him. Something broke inside Gruf and Jorrin, although for different reasons.

***

Tho' death be the wage of honour
We claim the debt as ours to fight for
We go

Medwyn looked bad. Much of the stores which proved to be safe to eat was portioned to the warriors of Dar Gaer in anticipation of the battle which surely must come. It was a hope the entire hold tacitly held. If they had to wait until the spring and the winter's thaw there was every chance none of them may be alive. Their hope lay in battle, and every dwarf there knew it.

That knowledge did not help Jorrin's guilt as Medwyn hobbled between the cannons on the upper north battery, his energy enough to give him movement or balance, not both. To Jorrin's eye the only difference between Medwyn now and Bradwen as he lay in his cot slowly dying was that Medwyn was upright and ambulatory. He kept the observation to himself.

Medwyn looked over a cannon, inspecting the joints. He peered down the barrel then lay his ear flat against it and rapped his knuckles experimentally along its length before standing and cleaning his hands with a rag. "This one."

Jorrin nodded to the soldiers behind him. They approached the gun with axes and began chopping into the frame and lining up the cuts for firewood.

"Be careful with the barrel," said Medwyn. "We might be able to salvage it later."

What later? Jorrin scoffed silently. Out loud, "How many more?"

“From this gallery? Maybe another five. Then of course we’d be better off moving all of the remaining cannons into as few batteries as possible to focus the fire power.” He leaned against another cannon and slipped on the ice riming the barrel. It gave a wordless indication of how difficult a job that would be.

“We’re leaving ourselves dangerously unprotected,” said Medwyn. “The south and east galleries have already been stripped. If they come that way we won’t be able to repulse any attacks.”

“You and the master ranger shored up the east,” said Jorrin. He spoke to Medwyn but his eyes were on the gallery windows. This high up the mountain the wind howled against the gallery's face, scouring the open windows and leaving icicles so thick they had to be hacked down by axes of block the view completely. Outside the blizzard wailed, whipping snow near-horizontally in the night. Jorrin had begun to think of the eternal howling as *the* blizzard. It appeared never to stop and differentiating one devastating storm from the next seemed pointless.

Medwyn’s laugh quickly descended into a barking cough. “Firing a single cannon into the ice overhang opposite and dislodging a hundred thousand tons of ice and snow on the valley below?” he shrugged as if it were nothing. “That’s good for one shot, and if the entire army isn’t caught in the avalanche…” he shrugged again. “And then there’s the south.”

“They won’t come from the south.”

“Why won’t they?”

How could he say that he just knew? That on a deep level of solid certainty he just knew the fallen would not try to retake Dar Gaer through subterfuge? That he just knew with a conviction he could not explain that the fallen, when they came, would come openly and in full force. That it was not just the hold they wanted, not just victory, but the despair of those inside Dar Gaer when they saw that they would lose, as if they drank anguish and would milk the hold’s inhabitants of all they could before the end.

Instead it was his turn to shrug.

“Well I wish I had your faith,” said Medwyn.

Not faith, he thought. *It’s been a long time since I had any of that*. Something out in the valley caught his eye. He stepped toward the window and looked out. The view which only months ago showed a swelling of luscious green hills filled with cattle and summer flowers was now a formless white, half hidden by the storm and the perpetual winter dark. But still, he saw something out there moving through the snow. “I thought the Herse ordered no more snow clearing until the blizzard died down.”

“He did.” Medwyn joined him the window. “And that’s too far out to be for snow clearing.”

Medwyn was correct. What Jorrin saw was out far beyond the base of the hold’s main northward gate. It was an indistinct form through the storm, but it was an out of place black on a field of white.

And it was moving.

Though nigh shapeless, legs could just be seen stepping out of the snow as the figure walked forward, with difficulty but unceasing.

“Who is that?” said Medwyn.

“No one I know,” said Jorrin, for it was a dwarf. The depth of its strides through the snow gave that away. As did the figure behind it.

Jorrin blinked, and looked at Medwyn, but the look on Medwyn’s face told him it was not just the strange mirages brought on from looking into endless white for too long.

And then there were more than two. And they were carrying torches, their tips glowing black red and giving out more smoke than light. And then the entire valley was covered from side to side with the advancing line of dwarfs, clad in black and moving through the cold as if born to it, bringing murder in their hearts and

the desire to take back what was theirs.

The fallen had returned to Dar Gaer, and their numbers blackened the valley further than Jorrin could see.

***

In time of death and deeds of the mighty
Our smallest sons and daughters will stand
We go

"Fire!"

The hall shook as the gun line unloaded in a single, shockingly loud volley. Despite being in the battlement above, the battery's simultaneous explosion compressed the air in the hold's entrance hall, tightening Jorrin's diaphragm and making his ears pop.

When Jorrin had first seen the gun line it looked like some functioning left-over from of the God War. It was a fitting defence for free clan's newest hold. Half a mountain's worth of ordnance, ready to unleash hell. At the time it seemed an obscene waste of resources, but now it sounded as if the entire battery was firing at once, and he didn't know at what.

Speculation murmured around him, each word's definition lost beneath the secondary battery's pounding and clamorous preparation for battle. Dar Gaer's hall befit the entranceway of the dwarfs of old. It was a legacy of the time before Winter, when there was peace and time enough to build on such scale. It would welcome kings from other holds, delegates from Mantica's other peoples. The skjalds said on temperate feast days the mammoth doors would be thrown open and the floor would hold a market and fete. Now it held the remains of Dar Gaer's war host, drawn in a line ramrod-straight, facing the barred gateway.

Jorrin looked up at the doors. They were crafted with arts long since gone, when dwarfs worked alongside gods. They looked as immovable as the mountain they were sunk into. But even so, despite the thunder rolling from the immense gun battery and the deceitful chaos of an army readying itself, he thought he could hear

something on the other side.

Boom.

“Did you hear that?” When Gruf didn’t answer he elbowed her. “Did you hear that?” he said again.

Gruf had been staring wide eyed at the door, repeating something lost beneath the sea of noise. She blinked and looked at him. “What?”

“Something outside the door.” She stared at him. Jorrin felt the familiar knot in his stomach, the blend of excited terror which twisted his gut before battle. Gruf should be feeling it too, but her face held more than the fearful embrace of her potential death. “Is something wrong?”

“Lass is ready for a fight!” A thick hand fell on Gruf’s shoulder and Herse Baddon stepped through the ranks. The Herse moved between the assembled warriors like an iceberg through a floe, and the tension bled to a level where the worried susurration stopped and all attention fell on Baddon. The Herse was a walking legend; a century of service to the free clans with not a single battle lost. It was Herse Baddon who had stormed Dar Gaer’s throne room and bisected the fallen Ironcaster who ruled here, reclaiming the hold once more for all the free clans with a single axe stroke.

It was impossible to feel afraid around Herse Baddon. It was impossible not to be brave.

All eyes were on the Herse as he strode before the front rank and looked down on them. “She’s not alone, is she? Are you all ready for a fight?” His voice dominated every other noise in the hall and was answered by a hundred more.

Jorrin was amongst them. He beat his axes together and shouted blood oaths to the Herse and to the hold. If he had the time he may have questions his sudden urge to join battle, to wash himself in the thrill of violence. But he was too lost, too excited. He turned to Gruf to fall in time with her own shield blows. But she did not shout. She looked directly at him with an expression he could not

read. It was not fear or excitement. Either would be understandable. It was something else.

Boom.

He turned to the door. There it was again. The battery above them unleashed its fury once more, this time in an uneven volley, and now there were shouts among the reports.

No one else seemed to hear. Herse Baddon unslung the great axe from his back and shook loose his long russet hair. Still facing the warriors he said, “We lost too many lads taking this hold to give it up. If those fallen bastards want to try and take it back, let ‘em come. We’ll show them what the edge of our axes feel like.”

The warriors thundered weapons against shields in approval.

Boom.

The clamour stopped and all eyes went to the gate. Everyone heard that. Even Herse Baddon turned. Had it been any other gate it would have rocked under the blow.

Baddon looked at the dwarves and closed his fingers around his axe haft. “No one lives forever, but today is not our day. Are you with me?”

The host roared and even when the door sounded another, louder impact they did not stop.

Boom!

Baddon grinned and turned to the gate, which exploded.

One moment the gate was there, then it was not. Forged by gods to withstand their own kind, the gate was built never to move unless opened from inside. Struck by a force so powerful its potential was never conceived, the gate stayed true to its design; it did not open. It simply ceased to be.

Instead millennium-hardened slices of wood cut through the air.

Jorrin's reactions were too slow to cover his eyes so he was still looking as a slab of petrified gateway the size of two dwarfs landed on Herse Baddon. The block crushed the Herse and skidded on under its momentum leaving a pink paste of blood and dust smeared across the hall floor.

It was too quick for Jorrin to comprehend, and he was still blinking as two deep red spots hovered into the view in the dust cloud where the gateway had just been. They looked like embers, but did not flow with the disturbed air, instead they grew more intense. It could have been that great braziers were being carried on the shoulders of warriors, were it not for them being seven yards above the ground.

The cloud whorled and bulged as something immense shifted within. Then the dust swelled, split and the two floating points of red lights became blistering eyes as the obsidian golem strode into the hall.

Jorrin looked up at the infernal construct and for the first time knew a fear so pure it overrode his sense of duty and tore at his primeval need to survive.

The golem strode effortlessly over the destroyed gate. Its movements, made deceptively slow by size, cracked and closed fissures across its black skin, gushing smoke at each opening and began to quickly fill the hall's roof. Paint peeled and smoldered where the smoke touched the ancient mural across the ceiling, erasing depictions of dwarven heroism which had endured centuries.

With thoughtless cruelty the golem stepped forward and the rock covering Herse Baddon's body disappeared under one great foot. The golem leaned on that leg and bent forward. When it opened its mouth the furnace inside vented in a bellow of blistering air, it lit the smuts falling from the ceiling until the hall filled with falling stars and the scorching roar of impending death.

Jorrin retained enough sense to take Gruf's hand before he turned, and for the first time since he left his birth hold, ran.

***

In timed past, gods to our side
Strength in arms, before us athanasia
We go

It was not fair, Jorrin thought with a small part of his mind not dedicated to saving his life. Two dozen dwarfs had just performed the single most courageous act he had ever seen. As the golem forced its way into the entrance hall, crushing aside masonry and mountain where its bulk would not fit, an entire wall of Ironguard formed up and locked shields. They were the elite, the veterans who had taken the hold with Herse Baddon. Without a word of command they drew the line to Dar Gaer and tacitly declared they would brook no Abyssal spawn to enter.

Jorrin knew he would remember their expressions, proud and grim, and how the gilt edging to their plate mail reflected the torchlight, and how that armor flew as the golem swept a broken column across their ranks, crushing armor and pulping bones, batting them through the air like skittles.

It wasn't fair, he thought, that those dwarfs had made the ultimate sacrifice and their names would never be known.

Shapes fluttered in the golem's smoke and harpies and other nameless nightmare things burst from the clouds. They flapped to the ceiling and hissed down at the slaughter or fell upon injured dwarfs.

But it was the sound of drums which told Jorrin this fight was over. The rhythmic beating came in time with the sound of boots and the first row of fallen stepped over the ruined gate. They came in a perfect line, un-bothered by the broken ground they walked across. The front rank as flat as a rule, as empty-eyed and unwavering as the dead. The ranks behind were more fluid as the fallen moved with the dwarfs lying injured from the retreating battle line, and ended their lives with single thrusts to the throat.

Jorrin told himself he didn't run because he was afraid, it was because the battle was lost. The entrance belonged to the fallen

now, and it would achieve nothing to stay there and die.

His first thought was to get to the upper gallery. The cannon battery overlooked the northern pass. They could climb out there. If the fallen wanted Dar Gaer let them have it. He could drag Gruf out and they could try and make it over the peak. If they could survive the cold and make it down to the southern meadows they might be able to reach another hold.

The passageway was a confusion of bodies; dwarfs running from the hall, other dwarfs mustering on their way in, calling to make way. He pulled Gruf through the chaos toward the stairway just as a dwarf collapsed backward over the bottom steps and lay still, his body folded around a blade sunk into his belly.

Jorrin looked up into the eyes of another dwarf. He was naked from the waist, cold curled off his pink raw skin in vaporous wisps and his chest heaved with hard breaths. Jorrin belatedly realised that if he thought of getting through the battery turrets then so could someone else.

The fallen berserker threw itself off the steps. Jorrin barely had time to raise his guard. He caught the haft on his forearm, jarring his arm to the shoulder in white pain. He was nearly pulled off balance as the fallen tried to pull back and the back blade caught on his arm.

The panic left him and time seemed to slow. He was no longer running from something beyond his control, *this* was something he knew about. He waited until the fallen tried to yank the weapon back again, and this time allowed the strength in the berserker's pull to add to his own, and he jabbed with his own axe haft into the fallen's face with a gristled crunch. The fallen stumbled back, blood and mucus bubbling from a suddenly-open nose.

The stun was momentary, and the berserker was already beginning the opening chords of a growl when Jorrin kicked it hard in the knee. The kneecap came loose and visibly slid up the thigh, but the fallen dwarf seemed not to notice what had to be excruciating pain. If anything the hate ruling its face twisted more and it growled in a way no dwarf should ever be able to.

But it did notice when it stepped forward and the leg would not straighten. It fell ungainly to the floor, its eyes never leaving Jorrin's own as it went down, spitting venom all the way.

Jorrin did not hesitate. He brought one axe down, driving the blow into the back of the berserker's neck. With a wet snap the fallen dwarf shivered and went still.

He had to put his boot to the fallen's corpse to yank the blade free, and when it did he was surprised at the pleasure he took in the sucking noise as it pulled from the wound. So much so he almost did not here Gruf's voice.

"Jorrin." It was full of worry, causing him to look above them up the stairs the fallen berserker had come down.

Around the corner torchlight cast the shadows more of figures. They did not move with the panicked, headlong run of dwarfs in flight; they came with purpose and numbers.

At the same time the tide of dwarfs into the entrance ceased. No more reinforcements came from other parts of the hold to secure the breach, and the only noise from the entrance hall was the mass of stone upon stone. No calls in dwarvish, no rallying blare of horns.

Jorrin took Gruf's hand and ran deeper into the hold.

***

Our land our homes, beyond value in gold
Are worth more than lives yet unborn, so
We go

The cold cut to his bones. Jorrin had never noticed it before. He had been born a dwarf, had spent the decades of his adolescence exploring what the free clans had to give to him; he had been sixty when he saw the sun for the first time and felt warmth on his skin which did not come from one of a hold's great forges. The piercing air of the tunnels had been his lifelong companion, so familiar he

had only ever noticed its absence.

But not now.

He raised his hand before his face and flexed the fingers in experiment. Scars crosshatched the skin, faded white ones earned over years, and red, still weeping ones from… more recently. Used, yes, but not old. Not old enough to account for the icy tendrils he could almost see fingering around his joints, making them ache and slow.

It was not age that made Jorrin abruptly aware of the cold. It was time, and how little he had of it left.

When you know you're going to die you begin to appreciate everything around you in a perfect clarity. It was odd the sagas mentioned nothing of it.

He wondered if anyone else around the fire were going through the same revelation.

Gruf looked into the fire, but she was not seeing the flames. She looked more than beaten; she looked empty.

After they fled from the upper gallery they had quickly run into other dwarfs, all retreating from the advancing line of fallen and their Abyssal beasts. There had been panic, and most were running to the south, hoping to find a way through the main entrance there and escape. But as Jorrin knew the fallen would not attack that way, he also knew they would not leave it unguarded. To leave through the south would be to walk to their deaths.

Medwyn and Cledwyn they had literally run into. They came from another gallery, colliding with Jorrin has they darted from another staircase. They had fallen in line behind Jorrin, trusting in their friend's instinct as he lead them away from the common flow of bodies fleeing south and up to the eastern battery, where Medwyn had primed a single cannon to fire into a vast snowbank overhanging the valley.

The eastern pass was too deep and too narrow for a serious

attacking force, or to allow an escape.

But if that valley was filled with snow….

Now the brothers sat together, their shoulders touching. Until recently they'd been arguing, the bickering of siblings' impenetrable language. Since the attack their words had turned sharp and empty until they petered away to the silence lying between them now.

And then there was Rhun. It did not seem right to call him 'master ranger' now there were no rangers for him to be master of.

Rhun had come to them as Jorrin did his best to protect Medwyn and Cledwyn as they prepared the cannon in the eastern battery to fire. Gruf had leant against a wall. She wore the dazed look of those deep in shock, leaving Jorrin stand alone at the stairways top, facing the fallen as they plied their way up the steps to get at them.

He had enjoyed that. It was straightforward; fight, protect, live. He spun like a dancer, making his two axes do the work of four. No foot placed by the fallen on the top step was followed by another as he answered each body with a blade.

Jorrin did not question this. He did not question the skill as each of his blows found their targets, the strength he could put into each strike, or the lusty cries he met each new challenger with. There simply was not time, just as there was not time for him to wonder at the sight of the figures climbing the steps to meet him. Dwarfs like him, yes, but not so. The pallor of their skin, the hatred in their eyes as they came to deliver death to him. It was not the way someone could ever be and still claim themselves to be dwarf.

But as tireless as he felt to be he knew he was exhausting himself. Each blow landed with less force than the last, each fallen made it one step higher than their predecessor. Behind him Medwyn and Cledwyn sweated priming a cannon intended for a team of four. He would run out of time before they were finished.

And then Rhun arrived. The press of fallen on the steps contracted and then burst as Rhun carved his way through. He vaulted fallen, using their ponderous black armor as handholds to jump one before

planting his axe in the back of another. He arrived at the stair's top without a word or nod to Jorrin, and then turned to join him in holding back the tide.

When it came, the cannon's firing was as welcome as it was thunderous. Jorrin's vision shook and his hearing left him, returning slowly in tinny inclinations. But the report was nothing to the roaring of a hundred thousand tons of snow crashed into the valley outside.

Jorrin would have liked to see that, but the fallen did not stop coming, only slowed due to the mound of their own bodies they had to force a breach over. Jorrin kept fighting and was still swinging when Rhun grabbed the back of his tunic and hurled the two of them through the gallery window and into a bed of soft snow far below.

Now Rhun paced just beyond the firelight's reach, as if he guarded them against the immeasurable darkness beyond. In the vast hall they camped in his was the only movement. Even now when they had run out of places to go the ranger needed to move. They had climbed up the valley, using the fallen snow to reach above the gallery they fled from, re-entering Dar Gaer at levels higher than Jorrin knew existed.

Rhun did. He explained how the highest and lowest levels had been blocked while the hold's population was low. Less space to have to defend. It made tactical sense, but Jorrin could hear the bitterness edging Rhun's words at plans that would never bud.

This part of the hold bore little resemblance to the halls Jorrin had come to know. Those had looked clean and new to his eye, and when he saw the soot-blackened motifs and sigils carved into the walls here he suspected the walls below had been purposefully scraped clean until only flat, virgin stone showed.

In the vast hall they came to was one unbroken wall which curved in an arc. It seemed to tell a story of the sky and the earth. Creatures of a size he could not imagine crawled from fissures in the ground to do battle with beings of equal size falling from the skies. Jorrin found himself walking the wall's length allowing his

hand to run over the pictorial narrative, engrossed in the story. Rhun's snapped order for him to stop broke the spell, leaving Jorrin riled. He'd wanted to see the story's end, had suspected the creatures from the fissures would defeat those from the air, and who was Rhun to order him? He bore no authority anymore, not over Jorrin.

Gruf slumped. She was leaning forward, elbows on knees, and she slipped from them. The near fall seemed to shake her awake, and she mumbled something about being tired. As she resumed her position she brushed the hair away from her face and Jorrin caught a glimpse of the skin on her neck; patches of mottled grey, reaching from beneath her collar to up behind her ear.

Anyone who'd seen the unfortunates who had contracted the poison from the befouled water could never forget the dappling of greens and greys which would slowly claim more of the victim's skin as the contagion killed them from inside out.

Jorrin wondered if Gruf knew, and decided against saying anything. It would change nothing.

"Flame *take it!*" Rhun struck his axe against a pillar as his pacing finally gave up to frustration. The pillar looked as if it might have been wood once, but entropy had done its work over an age and the axe may have well struck rock, and the blow rang shot-loud out passed their small ring of flames to be lost in the vast darkness.

The others jumped. Jorrin just watched.

"We could go back," said Cledwyn. The weakness of his delivery gave away how much hope he had in suggestion.

"We'd die," said Rhun.

"If we stay here we die," Cledwyn replied.

"Not as quickly," Rhun shook his head. "Dar Gaer will be crawling with those Abyssal bastards. At least alive we can do something."

"Like what?" Cledwyn's response was short, and he snapped off the

words with hot anger. “Do you have some idea of us waging a war on the fallen alone? There’re five of us, and only three of you are fighters. And where else can be go?”

Rhun closed his eyes before he answered, taking a deep breath, gathering his thoughts and his patience. “There are peaks above us. They go to the east and south…”

“Above us?” Cledwyn cut him off with a laugh. “A mountain top in midwinter, in these?” He pulled at his tunic.”

“We may not have a choice,” said Jorrin. “The fallen know we are here. They will not let us rest. Not while we may live.”

Cledwyn stood and paced around the fire, never once letting his eyes drift from Jorrin. “And how do you know that? You seem suddenly filled with knowledge about these monsters.”

“They’re not monsters. They were dwarf once, like you or I.”

“Dwarf? Dwarf!? They did not look like any dwarf I know. They didn’t look us, smell like us…” he slowed and when he spoke he looked at Jorrin as if through a new light, “…move like us.”

Before Jorrin could ask what he meant Medwyn slumped forward. Jorrin hadn’t noticed that Medwyn had not moved when his brother stood. Now he pitched down, striking the ground with his forehead and did not move.

Cledwyn was by his brother’s side in an instant, and Jorrin and Rhun both moved forward, but stopped before they were near. They had both seen death often enough to know its signature.

“Medwyn…” Cledwyn held his brother. Medwyn did not answer. Did not move. He laid limp in Cledwyn’s arms, mouth agape, eyes closed. Grey mottling covered his neck.

Rhun set his jaw, picked up his axe and said, “We move now. They’re still settling in down there. We could reach their Ironcasters before they’re properly defended.”

“No,” said Jorrin. He was looking down at Medwyn. Cledwyn was silently weeping, calling his brother’s name plaintively as if he could wake him.

“What?” said Rhun.

“I said no. This isn’t our war anymore. This isn’t even a war. Wars can be won, this is suicide. We’ll take the pass.”

Rhun stood taller and eyed Jorrin. “I gave you an order.”

Jorrin shook his head. “You have no authority over me.”

“Like hell!”

Jorrin finally turned to Rhun. When he spoke he made sure to look him directly in the eye. “Gruf and I are taking the pass.”

“I said like hell!” The last word was accompanied by Rhun’s axe carving the air. Jorrin’s two axes caught the blow. He had not even realised he had pulled them free.

Rhun’s next blow came from below, and his knee took Jorrin in the gut, knocking the wind from his chest and forcing him to release his axe. Instinctively Jorrin fell back and felt rather than saw the axe pass within inches of his face. He blinked back tears, took another step back and heard the whistle as Rhun’s blade split the air just over his head.

Without knowing why he dropped to one knee and crossed the two axes above his head, and was not entirely surprised to feel the ranger’s axe meet his guard with a ring and a shower of sparks.

When he opened his eyes they were free of tears, and he felt as if he could see everything in perfect clarity for the first time.

Run was drawing back his axe for another blow, an overhead chop that could split lumber. Jorrin watched as the ranger put his whole body into the swing, driving the blade down with terrible accuracy.

Then Jorrin simply stepped aside.

It was absurdly simple. He saw the move, and reacted. Never mind the axe was moving fast enough to sing, Jorrin sidestepped like it was a dance partner, and was at Rhun's side.

Rhun's eyes when wide, realisation at what the move meant mixed with the disbelief that it happened at all.

Jorrin struck. No time for kindness; a killing blow to the back of the neck, and Rhun, master ranger of Dar Gaer, fell.

The world sped up to match Jorrin's senses. He was breathing hard, looking down at Rhun's body, elation at the kill coursing through his veins. He remember the other two. Cledwyn Still held his brother's unmoving form, but looked at Jorrin with undisguised fear. Gruf had not looked up and had begun swaying slightly.

Without a word Jorrin took Gruf's hand and led her towards the exit, and the pass to the south.

***

armored mighty with weapons righteous
To reclaim our homes and, with them, ourselves
We go

Even the harshest icy valley wind could never had prepared him for the blasts of frozen air at the mountain's peak. It felt as if the wind were trying to strip the skin from his bones.

Jorrin struggled into that wind; so strong snow did not settle, instead ice pooled in hollows, as hard as the rock around them. All was rock and ice and the endless, oncoming cold. Gruf hung from his shoulder in an increasingly dead weight, stumbling where she could no longer hold herself up.

She faltered again, near dragging him down with her, but he held them both and moved on.

"No."

It was the first thing Gruf had said in hours, surprisingly strong for the way she clearly was, and what strength she had left fought against his helping her.

He acquiesced and lowered her down. She tried to lay on the bare rock, and Jorrin stopped her, laying her head on his lap and sitting so his back took the wind's brunt.

She breathed hard at her exertion for a moment, swallowed dryly, then opened ice-rimed eyelids to look at him. "Where are we?" she managed.

"I don't know," he said flatly.

"Why is it so cold?" She spoke in a sorrowful innocence like a child who did not understand. Numbed by cold into mental numbness or the poison in her blood bringing on a dementia. It could be either, and it did not matter. Something broke inside Jorrin and he began to weep, the tears freezing to his cheeks immediately. Without realising it he had attached Gruf's survival to his salvation, the reclamation of his soul.

Without it, without her, he may as well lay down on the mountain top and die.

"I'm cold," Gruf said in a faraway voice. "Can you bring me a blanket?"

"No," he said between sobs. "I'm afraid I can't."

"Ask Bradwen. Tell him to come here. I have something to tell him."

Jorrin let go then. He wept for his friends, for Gruf. But not for himself.

"I'll tell him," he said.

Gruf smiled and closed her eyes. "Thank you."

He stroked the side of her face. As he watched he could see the

grey mottled finger its way up her skin, reaching over her lower jaw. At each pulsing growth she breathed in sharply.

“Close your eyes and go to sleep,” he said. “I’ll wake you when Bradwen comes.”

Her smile broadened. He began to sing his Song to her. The second one, the one he’d written since he decided he would try to live. Each word felt a lie, but he thought it more soothing, and within moments Gruf fell asleep.

Slowly, careful to wake her, Jorrin pulled the axe from his holster and, before he could change his mind for what needed to be done, cut her throat.

He sat there for a long time, just cradling her head, the only sound the wind’s howl and the only movement the snow whipping over rocks. He had no tears left. He had nothing left worth saving. He had come to Dar Gaer to die and fate had cruelly dangled salvation within arm’s reach only to snatch it away.

Then he began to sing his old Song. It felt the right thing to do. His soul was gone. He had tried to reclaim it, and failed. He could at least mourn it while he was able

He felt them arrive. Nothing could have been heard beneath the wind’s piercing whistle and his head was lowered, but he knew they were there. They brought a kind of negative emptiness with them, it surrounded them like a miasma.

He looked up. Their shapes could be seen in in the blizzard. They circled him, but made no move to approach. He recognised their silence for what it was. They offered blessed oblivion, an eternal insensibility in return for his servitude. All he had to do was say the word.

He looked about him. They had many names, these souls lost to the Abyss. *Fallen* was the least blasphemetic, but perhaps the most accurate. They had fallen in life.

Just like him.

He stood, careful to lay Gruf's head as gently onto the bare rock as he could, and walked towards them. The fallen opened their ranks to him, and as he walked, closed behind him.

The End

Hope

by Chris Davis

A dark field, late in the hours of night. A time when most would be asleep, save for three poor wretched slaves. They trudge through what had been at one time a massive farm, but the only crop this barren earth leaves to harvest now is corpses. For the slaves the corpses are a reminder of life as it had been. Freedom, to fight to live and to die but for them such freedom is gone. Now all they have is their task.

Each slave carries a large obsidian orb, cool to the touch, oddly though not as cool as one would imagine such an object to be. The slaves in reflection to the orbs are nothing more than a mess of filthy clothing worn to nothingness. They are barely able to keep themselves standing, so feeble are their frames. Despite this they clutch to the orbs with a desperation born of fear and that ever so intoxicating drug: Hope.

Each slave has been told in no uncertain terms that if they drop or lose the orb in their care, they will be killed. Not just killed, but slowly and in the most painful of ways; while slavery be a form of hell, Death can be a much more cruel hell in its slow release. Sadly, these wretched souls know not that they carry a death sentence.

As the slaves make their way along the farm of the dead, the orbs that were at first cool begin to have an odd warmth. A warmth that increases as they go further along. It is not till they are far along and the first signs of life are seen, that the slaves realize something is truly wrong. It is a small company of men that triggers the reaction. A birth of sorts, but one of the most foul nature.

Most births in nature can be described as a form of beauty; that is not what this birth creates. No, this maelstrom of hate, fury, violence, and pure malice screams into life, tearing and rending as it comes along. First the orbs the slaves carries increases in heat in leaps and bounds, from cool black obsidian to red to white hot. All the while greenish witch-fires pour forth out of countless small cracks along the orbs.

The flames pouring from the orbs leap, bound, and rend at the very air. They sunder everything near them, forming a literal vortex of fire. The slaves are spared the vortex of fire: in the process they are consumed by the intense heat, so fast is the acceleration and intensity of the fire coming from the orbs upon sensing the company of men.

As the slaves are consumed in the heat of the orbs, a shape is molded, forced and made whole. The orbs travel along the fire that is coming out of them, bobbing and weaving as they travel like a bubble in a flow of water that refuses to burst. A column shoots down from the orb to create a base, and from this base a torso of sorts is created of pure flame. As the flames rise up and away from torso, arms branch out and end in crude, massive clawed hands. As if a jape of anatomy, the orb travels to the chest and in a final act of defiance, bursts from the chest cavity to create a parody of a head. The obsidian orb finally settles in place as the head of this construct of pure fire flame and hate. They are beings of pure inferno, hate and rage, made manifest by the very fire that birthed them.

The cruelest jest of all though is that those poor souls who carried these orbs sentenced their own kind to death, all for the price of hope. In the mind of the dawi zharr, hope is a foolish notion of lesser slave races. To these evil stunted men, there is no hope; just the natural order of things. Lesser races are to be used, and any tool used against them is not seen as deceptive. It is merely the appropriate treatment of all lesser races.

A Shadow Over Wessenland

by Joe Murphy

See the king on his knees. On his knees and not even knowing.

See him. Alfred Lundsman. Lord of Wessenland. By right and by blood. See him as he sits on his throne. In his long hall. See him as he smiles. See his eyes. The brightness of them. He laughs and places his hand on the shoulder of the kneeling figure at his feet. A man. Balled almost double like some religious supplicant. The man holds a drawing in his hands. A sketch of a castle. A plan.

Not a thing of wood and shaped turf like the long hall in which Alfred and his forefathers held court. Held court since the founding of the kingdom by Alfred's great-grandfather. Not this thing, though. This was a thing of stone and slate. A facsimile of the buildings described in wondering tones by the Wessenland sailors returned home. Raiders and traders. And slavers, too. Once upon a time. Before Alfred and his lust for change. For enlightenment.

Before Alfred. Longships chopping through the sea. Longships knifing inland. Slicing their way up the warm rivers of softer peoples. Bringing fire and steel and the long, slow death of the captive enslaved.

Not now, though. Not under Alfred. Alfred the Learned. Alfred the Bookish.

See the western coast of this land. The coast of Wessenland. Sand-seamed, where it slopes to the sea. Black mountains bordering it to the west and north. The terrain motley with green and gold and brown. Wessenland. Wessenland and its people under the coming dark.

The ditches, the fields, the brown ribbons of the roads, all are limned in the purple and gold of the dying day.
It is late summer and all is quiet. All is calm.

And in the dusk, in the fields, the blocky shapes of oxen can be seen. Steam flaring out from their snub noses. The harvest

beginning. Men and women gathered in teams about their ploughs. Work clothes and dusty leather all becoming matt black in the failing light. And here and there in the fields, bigger beasts work. Their riders strapped into their saddles some yards above the earth they till. Clod stompers, they are nicknamed. Heavy slabs of muscle and fur and sinew. Alien things in their pastoral surrounds. But vital all the same. Hugely strong and tuned to their rider's every impulse. They are an extension of will as much as of limb. In the deepening dusk they stoop, hefting boulder and bale on the prongs of their tusks.

The people look on. Massive animal and fragile human united in shared labour.

And there are other things too. In the gloom. Mounted soldiers. Armored and silent. At the edges of copses. Lighting the fields and the soft, new plough with the glow of their watch lights. Iron sentinels. The eyeshine of the night animals throwing their bright vigilance back at them. Their steel casings muted in the dusk. They stand. Isolate. Unmoving as the mountains wallowing in the blood of the day's dying.

Wolf Riders, they are called. And Ironclads. Called by the small figures of flesh and bone over whom they watch. Called other by those they bring violence to. Bone Breakers. Widowmakers. Iron Horse. Each one tall and broad. Hands ending in huge metallic gauntlets. One gripping the reins, the other resting on the haft of a warhammer. The cold tool of a grim trade.

This is the kingdom of Wessenland. A kingdom, like many other kingdoms, straining at the leash. A kingdom new-formed and mewling. Wet from the womb and anxious to stretch its legs.

And under Alfred's grandfather and father it did just that. The League of Rhordia, practical and politic, was the first to open trade negotiations with this upstart and barbarous kingdom from the north and west. And the League received furs and timber and amber trinkets of dazzling beauty. And Wessenland, for its part, received blackpowder weapons and the training to use them.

The Machinists of the League revealing just enough of the secrets of

gun and cannon to support the Wessenland armies in their wolfish exploits. Line regiments of soldiers in green-and-red coats, black powder weapons and cavalry troops. Feathered helmets. Uniforms beginning to ape those of the League and other more *refined* kingdoms. The bark of rifles and the snap of pennants and behind them, the primal roar of gunpowder. The bellow of the big guns. Another people brought to heel.
And then it stops.

Alfred stops it all.

His *learning* stops it. Stops the march of his own nation.

Alfred calls back the armies and the longships. Silences the cannon. Calls back the ravening hordes of berserkers.

Instead, he builds libraries. He frees the slaves and, at a stroke, outlaws the taking of them.

In the eyes of some, he has become corrupted by the flabby sentimentalism of the southern lands. The lands of sun and honey. The lands where the wolf is seldom seen.

And now, as the moon rises, its light falls over the city of Wessenland Harbour itself. Through an arrow slit, Alfred looks out on his people. A town buzzing with commerce and alive with noise and light. The clamour of prosperity and the yawp of ignorant high spirits. The moonlight falls over the bright town and the dark sea that laps against it.

And laps too against the shins of a solitary figure that stands in the shallows. Harald Wealdsturm, Earl of Innsmouth. Armored and helmeted as though for war. The figure stands and looks eastward. Looks at the small glow from Alfred's window. He seeks out Alfred but in the dark and at this remove he cannot see his king. But he knows he is there. Naïve and weak. Coddled in pages of empty writing.

He watches from the shallows. Watches with his ship riding the combers behind him. Watching and waiting. As though he can see the end coming.

See the king on his knees. Alfred with blood worming from his lips. Alfred with his hands clawing at his throat. From another room the sounds of screaming. His wife. His sons.

His sons too? Had there been time? Time to escape?

See the king as he falls.

And suddenly Harald Wealdsturm is Lord of Wessenland. By right and by conquest. The earl of Innsmouth, an earldom of salt flats and shallow channels. An earldom built on slavery and the revenue it brought. An earldom chewed by frost and smothered by ice for three months of the year. An earldom impoverished by Alfred and his soft, southern mores. An earldom ruled by a family with more than a little Varangur blood in their veins. An earldom that now held the reins of power and would steer Wessenland wherever its bloody-handed lord wished.

And he wished a return to the old ways.

Suddenly, the great Basilean and Rhordian craft that ploughed the seas for trade and other business stopped coming to Wessenland. All knew why. Harald with his horned helm and vicious arrogance. Harald and his wanton cruelty. In Wessenland knowledge was lost. Sometimes wilfully. Technology failed. And things that should not have been forgotten vanished in the unspooling of the years. The Machinists who had tended Alfred's fledgling milling and weaving machines fell away in expertise. Things decayed. People moved on to a future that was a shadow of ages long past.

Only the war machines were maintained. The arquebus and the cannon.

Clod Stompers were harnessed and equipped for battle. Their tusks honed. Their brains maddened.

And so the Fall of Wessenland began. As the kingdom grew again, so too did it become more savage, more barbaric. Old nations. Conquered through blade and gun. Falconfall first. Then the Eastland colonies were formed. Natives all dashed to pieces by a

hail of shot and shell. Crushed by Wolf Riders and Beasts of War. Then Sciria. Then Landvor. Then a host of others. Harald's berserkers given free rein to slick the land with gore.

And so it came to be that Wessenland became synonymous with barbarism, which had so lately been a beacon of learning and advancement. And all the lands around it became sodden and impregnate with blood. The terrain become a butcher's block.

And yet, the crown sits heavy on the head of Harald Wealdsturm.

For Alfred's sons still lived.

A Free Dwarf, A Sea Kindred, And A Sylvan Kindred Enter A Bar

by "Dorf_Pally_Dan"

Proofread and Edited By Mrs. Tyr E.

The Broken Keg Tavern-Culloch Mor.

"I told ya to stand down short-beard," replied the older dwarf to the younger dwarf who was now splayed out on the floor. Whether the young buck was still conscious or not was debatable, but the old timer was too tipsy at the time to care. Still, he could handle his liquor better than most of his age. Even for proper dawi standards! But then again, trying to constantly drown one's pain and sorrows in kegs of gotrut for a multitude decades will do that.

He stumbled his way back up to the bar. He then told the barkeep, "Nuvel! Another mug of yer goblin spit."

"Are you going to pay for that?" the barkeep asked, "Yer at the end of yer tab and I don nae run a charity! If ya want that, go to the local manling Cathedrals and almshouses run by the Basileans or the Brotherhood! They're in the Manling Trade Quarter."

"Ja, ja. I got it," the older dwarf annoyedly replied with a hand waive.

He then dug through a pouch on his belt and brought out a rather ancient statuette; obviously it was of Elven make. The statuette came from back when the pointed-ears were in their prime and were a force to be reckoned with. Much as he used to be. Before the Abyssals, before the Undead, before the rise and fall of Lady Winter, and the Delluvian Catastrophe that came when her Ice Age ended.

The barkeep's eyes widened a bit at the sight of the statue, but he quickly recomposed himself and picked up the statue and examined it. It was a thing of beauty. A Mithril statue of an Elven Royal Guard standing at attention. It was inlaid with Gold and Silver Foil and with Rubies, Sapphires, Eastern Jade, Pearls, and other valuable gems. "I think this will more than cover my debts to you

barkeep," the rather thirsty and dry dwarf continued, "And, should also allow me another two-hundred Southern Crowns worth o' drinks besides."

The barkeep started, "Well, I dunno abou-"

The rather surly drunk growled at him and started to give him the Evil Eye. The Barkeep then stammered, "V-Very well then; you may consider your debts paid and you now have two hundred Crowns worth of drinks left to buy on your tab."

"Glad to make you see reason," the drunkard replied as he calmed down and went to nursing his new stein of over-glorified paint remover.

It was then that two ear-blades walked up behind the dwarf. One sat to his left and the other sat to his right. The dwarf, even in his drunken stupor, could sense he had company. Past experience as a cutthroat, hired thug, soldier of fortune, and bar brawler kicked in. He knew that many a shortbeard would probably try to immediately swing at one of them, and hope the element of surprise would kick in.

Still, he knew the odds were against him if they were hostile, even with the weedy members of the elven race. No, he would let things play out for the time being and see where things went.

"That was a nice statue," the elf to his left replied in the lilting accent of the Sea Kindred. She was a rather fair lass. Her borderline pinkish-white hair seemed to have been an unconventional cross between a red-head or strawberry blonde and a platinum blonde. She kept her rather long locks tied up in a ponytail which trailed down her backside into the lowered hood of a robe which she was wearing.

Since the hood was down, he could see her face clearly. She had eyes of emerald and some red freckles upon the bridge of her nose and cheeks. If they had plans to be malicious, you would think they would keep their faces better hid. But, then again, it could be part of the ruse. The dwarf then briefly tugged on his braided gold and silver-streaked beard while looking to his right. It was another

robbed elf. This time a male. He also had his hood down, which showed a head full of spiked hair, dipped snow white in lime. The spiky hair was shaped to point straight up. If it had been done a bit more evenly and neatly it could've passed for a proper flat-top instead.

He heard some of the Sylvan Kindred of The Galahir Forest would do this as a form of self-decoration along with a more traditional greenish and/or blue woad. It was times like this the dwarven axe-for-hire hoped the rumors that this tavern in the elven slums doubled as front business for a shanghaiing ring for the Sea Kindred Fleets was false. While he didn't mind working for the "Fair" Folk, he would rather get paid for it!

The somewhat tipsy dwarf took another sip of his Ogre Swill and replied, "Ja. I took it from an Ogre I kneecapped who was fighting for our fallen cousins. Let's just say he didn' nae live long enough to earn his pay. Ja?"

He then emptied his mug and motioned for the raven-bearded dwarven barkeep to get him another round. "Beautiful? Isn't it? Rest assured, unlike other dwarfs, I can admit to seeing a fine elven piece of art when I see it," he chuckled while taking a quick glance and a wink over at the fine lass of the elfin duo.

She blushed ever so slightly for a brief moment and nervously fidgeted with her ponytail for a bit, but then quickly cleared her throat and recomposed herself. He then took another sip and continued, "It's probably best I got rid of it today. It reminded me of better days, for both of our peoples."

"Better for both of our peoples? How so? Is nae your Empire on the rise once again," the spiky-haired elf inquired.

At that the dwarf chuckled bitterly yet again. "Hah! 'Mein' Empire! Das ist rich!" He then hocked up some phlegm and spat it on the cobblestone floor and continued his rant, "I'll have ya know mein Herr und Damen that despite being a dwarf I am not with th' Golloch Empire or the accursed Abyssal Ones. May the great fires of the Rift roast the fallen ones for eternity! No, in case you couldn't tell from my accent and dialect, both of which are influenced by the

Varangur Expatriates of The Mammoth Plains, I am from the former "Free Lands" of the Northern Dwarves! Now Fiefdoms of der 'Great und Mighty' Golloch Empire in everything but name! Once 'free dwarves' forced to take knee due to the death of a foolish Thane, being pressed on both sides, and a shortage of manpower and resources!"

It was around this time that the female Sea Kindred subtly passed the barkeep a bag of coins and the barkeep, in turn, hurriedly pinched a few grains of powder from a bag kept under his counter into the other dwarf's tankard while he was distracted by his own enraged, drunken tirade.

"Well, a toast to the fallen I say," the dwarf exclaimed in a mixture of both deep bitter resentment and mourning, "and to the days that we shall never see again. Ach, fortunate are the fallen dead, who don' nae have to suffer the present." The dwarf then raised his Pewter Tankard and took a big swig.

"And to what is yet to come," the Elven Maid replied in turn, "For someday winter will end and spring will come once more. For truly I say to you that I think that both of our peoples can be great again."

"Nuvel, what are you talking about you infernal sword-ear-," the dwarf started to say before he fell over into a deep slumber.

"Another conscript for the fleets," the Bartender chuckled questioningly as he emptied the drink into a basin behind the counter and started to wipe the stein down with a slightly-soiled rag.

"Not quite," the female Elf answered as she brought her hood over her head, and proceeded to help her compatriot pick up their newly-acquired prize and quasi-stand and quasi drag him between their shoulders. "As usual, a pleasure doing business with you," the bartender chuckled some more as he went back to cleaning out his collection of steins.

"Likewise," the elven lass replied with a slight and knowing smile. A smile that indicated that this was far from the first time they have

engaged in very, very similar business arrangements.

“You remember the plan,” the female elf replied to her male partner-in-crime. “Of course I do, you infernal squid,” he barked back, “We act drunk, stumble a bit, sing some slurred tunes, and if any shorty guards question us about what we’re doing, we tell them this sack of dead weight is a fellow mercenary and we’re taking him back to the Cliff’s Edge Inn to sleep his hangover off. All though, I could spice it up a bit and say that you and he were planning to…”

“You’re a barrel of laughs, you know that you infernal land-lubber,” she snapped back as they proceeded to drag/carry the rather short and yet rather heavy dwarf in plate back to the hideout. They could’ve disarmed him, even sold his weaponry for a pretty profit, but time was short and they needed to get a move on. Not to mention their Majordomo was insistent that their noble employer demanded that he and all of his wargear and personal items were to be brought back in one piece. That made the job even harder, as traversing the rust-inducing and diseased sewers were now out of the question.

Bureaucrats who knew nothing of how the outside world worked were such a pain at times. It seems the higher-ups amongst the Nobles of Elvenholme had special plans for him. They knew bits and pieces of what they had in mind (and more than a few rumors). But, it was not their place to question. They were to only follow orders. No more and no less. They were cutthroats, scouts, and spies. They dug up info (often via a bit of torture and bribery), assassinated political and military targets, performed the occasional bit of sabotage, and once in a while a bit of kidnapping and defector extraction. Such as the kidnapping they were doing right now.

They snuck from alley to alley and from street corner to street corner the best they could under the circumstances. While they paid off the local gangs and toughs protection money earlier on to leave them be during this operation, there were no guarantees that they would fulfill their promise. They just hoped that the local thugs would be smart enough not to kill the proverbial golden goose for a few more coppers. And they also hoped the backup sleeper cells in the area would be able to rescue them from either the Mafiosos or the Law in case they got caught.

It was then that they saw someone approach them. However, it wasn't one of the local bands of rowdies and rogues. No, it was members of the local Ironguard with accompanying mastiffs. They were doing the best they could to keep law and order in a very hostile and run down part of the Thane's Hold. Indeed, due to the danger of patrolling this borderline warzone, they were given the authority to act as judge, jury, and executioner when travelling in formerly "no-go" neighborhoods by the High Thane himself. Not to mention they were allowed to have some rather nasty mastiffs accompany them. Something the crossbow and firearm equipped troops usually didn't have.

As they approached, the blonde elf put on her best and most charming smile and greeted, "Why, hello there gentlemen! How are you this fine evening?"

"Cut the formalities lass," replied the lead Ironguard Patrol Dwarf, "What are you doing with that dwarf yer carrying there?" As he started his gruff inquiry, the nearby mastiffs growled hostilely.

The Order of Maurice

by Ben Stoddard

Episode 1: Just Desserts

The sound of broken grass tore the shop owner to his feet as he watched a ragged shape tumble across the floor now covered with jagged shards of his front window. The heap of rags rose to its feet and tore out through the back door of the common room. Moments later a hulking brute of a man wearing chainmail and some form of strange heraldry embroidered on his tunic with a sword at his hip charged into the room.

The large man looked around questioningly and the bewildered shopkeeper pointed dumbly towards the still open door leading into the back alley. The man grunted his thanks and charged off after his quarry.

Meanwhile the heap of tattered rags bolted through the back alleys. Jephraim's feet ached and he could feel several minor cuts and scrapes from the window beginning to complain but he didn't have the awareness to spare for such minor details.

Only that morning Jephraim had been slated for the dungeons for theft and some trumped up charge of slandering some local magistrate's character. Well, the slander part was true, but Jephraim knew that it was really because he'd been caught in the magistrate's daughter's chambers that had really been the nail in his coffin. That and the several outstanding warrants for stealing that had been hanging over his head, but even the crime hadn't really matched the punishment he'd been given.

As the judge had been about to issue his sentence, however, a man in a strange tunic, wearing some strange armor had pushed his way through the double oak doors at the back of the courtroom and had stalked up to stand behind the judge. The judge had seemed perturbed until the stranger had bent over and whispered something in his ear, producing a set of documents that he placed in front of the official, whose face blanched as the man whispered some unknown horrible facts into his ear.

As the stranger had straightened back up the Judge had coughed and sputtered and declared that Jephraim was to accompany the stranger, whom he had labelled Captain Morticus, on an expedition. The guards had clamped shackles on his wrists and lead him outside of the court building where they handed him off to his new master.

Jephraim had smiled and said all the right things, waiting for his chance.

It hadn't taken long; as they walked through the village square Jephraim slipped easily out of his restraints and turned to run. What he hadn't anticipated is that the Captain had enlisted the services of a giant who moved better than any thief that Jephraim had ever met. As he turned to run, he had suddenly felt himself lifted off the ground and his own momentum used against him to throw him through the air and through the shop window. Now he was running from the law, again.

It was a familiar, if uncomfortable, feeling to which he had grown accustomed to in his years of being a thief. He ducked into side alleys and backstreets all the while listening for the huge man's heavy breathing behind him. His lungs felt ready to burst as he sprinted down the wrong alley and found himself facing a dead end with only steep wooden shop walls to either side of the alley.

Gasping to catch his breath, Jephraim glanced around in hopes of finding some form of escape. He could hear his pursuer's heavy steps coming closer and closer. Frantic, Jephraim spied a sewage outlet; it was much too small for him to fit through, but it might throw the big man off his trail.

Desperately he wrenched at the grate until it fell loudly onto the ground. Jephraim then quickly grabbed hold of the low hanging eave of the second floor window hanging above him and pulled himself up to crouch against the narrow sill, hoping that the man chasing him wouldn't look up.

Jephraim didn't have to wait long. Almost as soon as he had pulled himself up the heavy footfalls of his pursuer stomped into the abandoned alley. The large man jogged forward, his eyes glancing

all around him, searching. He came up to the grate and inspected the sewage hole briefly. He grunted in frustration and kicked the heavy grate, sending it skittering across the alley to slam against the far building and rebounding back again to make a loud ruckus. The large man took a few deep breaths and scrubbed his hands across his shaved scalp before walking back to the entrance of the alley way slowly.

As he rounded the corner Jephraim breathed a sigh of relief. Gently he lowered himself back down into the alley, careful not to make any noise that might call the large man back. The thief was already making plans: he needed to get out of the city and possibly out of this small border kingdom.

Perhaps he'd head east, towards the dwarven kingdoms; there was enough strife there that he could hide out for awhile and perhaps get a decent mug of ale, too. He needed to secure some travel papers, and would need a new look and a new identity, but he already had several ideas in mind. Grinning at his luck, Jephraim turned the corner out of the alley…

...and ran straight into a wall of muscle that reached down and grabbed him around his throat, wrapping him into a choke hold. The last thing Jephraim saw before succumbing to blissful oblivion was that of his bald pursuer, smiling down at him.

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A warm breeze that smelled of saltwater brought him around. That and a massive headache that caused him to see spots from behind his eyelids. Groaning, he opened his eyes and then closed them again immediately as the glaring sun lashed out at him with searing rays of light. His groans turned into pained whimpers and he curled his body up into a protective ball while the world seemed to spin around him.

"Awww, is tha' liddle un' up yet?" a rough voice called out. A leathery hand reached down and slapped lightly against Jephraim's cheek.

"Wakey, wakey lil' deary!"

The gruff voice devolved into a scratchy laugh that caused the spots swimming in Jephraim's dark vision to pulsate and his head felt ready to burst.

Forcing his eyes open, the thief stared up into the ugliest face he'd ever woken up to. A man with a motley mohawk standing out against a sunburnt scalp stared back at him. An eye patch was over his left eye and his mouth was pulled back into a rotting smile that was easily missing as many teeth as it still had remaining.

"Thar she is!" the rotting smile laughed, sending brown flecks of spittle down to mist across Jephraim's face. The thief grimaced and tried to wipe his hand across his face only to discover that both of his hands were encased in a pair of metal mittens that were fused into a clenched fist and welded together to prevent individual movement. Heavy bands wrapped around his wrists to prevent him from pulling his hands out of the restraints.

On top of that, he discovered as he attempted to sit up that he was strapped to the floor of what seemed like a wagon by a heavy metal bar that ran across his chest and a second that pinched painfully against his ankles. The wagon swayed back and forth as the uneven wheels wrenched across the uneven road underneath him.

"What happened?" Jephraim tried to croak, but all that came out was a choked gurgle. His throat ached and it hurt when he tried to move his mouth. The mohawk laughed his scratchy laugh.

"That'll happen' when Burns catches ye." He chortled and reached down to free a wineskin from his belt. Reaching down, he put the unstoppered lip of the bag to Jephraim's lips. The taste of acidic bile entered his mouth mixed with some strange, herb-like flavor that tasted of rancid grass and dirt. Jephraim coughed and spit the concoction out of his mouth, some of it still trickled down his damaged throat, lighting the bruised lining on fire and causing him to cough painfully.

"I knoo," the mohawk laughed as he watched Jephraim's reaction with increasing mirth. "It do taste like summit ye'd find comin' outta a diseased coo's bladder, but it'll help ye recover, ye can no

lie aboot like an expect ta get anywhere! Noo, open up! Here it coomes!" Another wave of vile liquid splashed into Jephraim's open mouth, this time more of it making it down his throat against his will.

As his coughing subsided, Jephraim was surprised to notice that his throat *did* feel better and his head hurt far less than it had moments earlier, even if it did still feel as though a mad dwarf was hammering away inside of his skull. Jephraim glared up at the mohawk, noticing the same strange heraldry that the Captain and his pursuer, whom the mohawk had named Burns, had worn. It was a white chevron on a black field with a red diamond in the middle with three gold diamonds chief across the black field over the white chevron.

"Where am I?" He croaked "Who are you people?"
"Ah!" The mohawk exclaimed pointing to the heraldry he wore on his chest "Me name be Wilford, an' we are the Order o' Maurice fra' further est o' heer, near tha Abyss. Big ol' keep next ta tha' dark lands, ya knoo. Fightin' demons an' tha like. Ye be oour newest member! Congrat'oolations on tha'!" Wilford laughed as a look of terror passed over Jephraim's face.

"But I'm no warrior!" Jephraim cried out.

"No? Well, that'll change' soon enow." Wilford shrugged. "Ye be lucky, we were no gonna stop, but we loost one o' oour oon a few days back, an ye were the oonly one oour Cap'n would tak' on when we happen'd ta pass yer city by!"

The look on Jephraim's face must have given away his confusion because the rough man laughed. "Ah, tis' a fairly commun thin' ta see. Lotsa minor kingdoms wil' sen' their criminals ta tha Order ta serve their sentence. No many survive, mind ye, but those who do often do no wanna leave afterwards, ya knoo. Like I did say, we fight demons and su', kinda a firs' line o' defense agin em', ye ken?" Again, Jephraim's eyes widened with fear.

"Oh, do no fear, me boy! Ye do no hafta worry 'bout no demons, lease' whys not fer tha present. Ye'll prob'ly be daid afore we gets back ta tha Order. Which will no' be fer sum time." Wilford

chuckled, but this time it was devoid of any mirth.

“Why? Where are we going? What are we doing?” Jephraim’s voice sounded strangled for reasons that had nothing to do with his bruised throat.

“Oour Gran’ Master ha’ sent us on a speshul mishun, ye ken.” The gruff face stared straight ahead as he spoke. “He did sen’ us ta fetch a speshul kinda metal, tha kind that do com’ fra the sky. Star-metal it be called. Said he do need it fer somethin’ speshul. An’ thar be oonly one place ta find it, well, one place tha’ ye can find it easier than most places.”

“And where is that?” Jephraim asked. Wilford hesitated for a moment before answering.

“Perditus,” he said after a long pause.

“We be headin’ to tha Forsaken’ Isles.”

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Episode 2: Friends of Necessity

Jephraim heaved as the ship rolled ceaselessly beneath him. He sat in the aft of a small cutter that Morticus had hired to take them out to the Forsaken Isles, watching in misery as the rest of the inhabitants of the craft sat and conversed in the relatively calm weather they were experiencing. Jephraim had always hated sailing and had avoided it whenever possible. His lifestyle had often times required him to flee across oceans, and sometimes the fastest way out of town was to stow away on the river barges that traders would use to haul their shipments, but what he had learned was that there were no tricks, no remedies, that could solve his seasickness, despite what every sailor had tried to teach him.

What made it all so much worse were the heavy mitten gauntlets that had been cuffed over his hands to prevent him from escaping. They had been travelling for a little more than two weeks at this point since Jephraim had unwillingly been forced to join their companionship, and in that time there had been practically no one

to talk to. Other than Wilford, that is.

The mohawked man made it a point of telling Jephraim how deadly and dangerous their mission was and how likely it was to get him killed. The only thing that had caused him to relent was Jephraim's bout of seasickness that either caused him to feel some pity, or repulsed him enough to keep him away, most of the time anyways. Even as this thought entered his head, however, Jephraim watched the raggedy character focus his gaze on him and begin walking over to sit next to him against the soggy hull of the ship.

"Not long noo." He grunted as he slid down onto his haunches. "We be comin' up on Perditus shortly. We'll be goin' straight ta the hart o' tha main island, so you'll be gettin' a baptism by fire."

Jephraim blanched, a difficult thing to accomplish in his present ill-faced pallor. "Why would the captain take us straight into the city as soon as we arrive? I thought for sure we'd have to re-supply or some such endeavor before heading into the ruins!" Jephraim had heard stories of the Star-Struck City and if even half of the stories were true then they were headed into a den of nightmares, with the Captain spurring them into a suicidal sprint towards the darkness.

"The Cap'n did say that we be behind schedule, havin' to catch ye and all has put 'im in a fool mood, ta say tha least." Wilford chuckled and clapped Jephraim on the shoulder. "Dinnae fret yersel' me boy! We'll no let ye die tha fast! Twas too much fuss tryin' ta catch ye! Speakin' o which…"

Wilford reached over and grabbed the mitten gauntlets that constrained Jephraim's hands. Producing a strange looking key he inserted it into the keyhole and twisted. With a sharp click the pressure on Jephraim's wrists released and he breathed a sigh of relief as the shackles fell away and thudded heavily onto the floor of the boat. Cautiously he flexed his fingers and rubbed his hands together in an effort to restore feeling to the numb bits.

"You aren't scared I'll try to run away again?" he asked without looking at the gap-toothed grin sitting beside him. This produced a full belly laugh from Wilford.

“Ye wait till we gets there an then, if’n ye choose ta flee then we’ll see how far ye make it afore somethin’ scroffs ye up. Tha Cap’n would be doon right tickled that all tha effort he did take ta get ye here’d be wasted in tha firs’ minutes o’ us bein’ ashore, though.”

Jephraim glared at him, but Wilford merely shrugged, and then his face drew a much more stern look to it. “In all trooth, though, if’n ye wanna stay alive, ye’ll ha’ ta trust us, an ye’ll ha to watch oor backs jus’ as we’ll be watchin’ yors. Ya get me?” This caused Jephraim to pause. Wilford had never spoken to him in such a serious tone and it was more than a little upsetting that he did so now. He nodded his understanding.

“Good.” Wilford pushed himself to his feet and stretched. When he brought his hands down he reached under the folds of his ragged cloak and produced a weapon that was too long to be called a knife, yet too short to be called a sword. It had a thick blade that ended in a squared tip, giving the whole thing a triangular shape with the sharp side running the long length of the blade. He reversed the weapon and held the handle out to Jephraim, who reached out gingerly to grasp it. It was far heavier than he would have expected, but the heft felt good in his hands.

“Tha’ be called a seax; it be like a sword, but it do no require tha finesse tha a sword do. D’ye think ye can use it, if’n ye needs ta?” Wilford raised an eyebrow. Jephraim stared for a long second at the weapon and then nodded absentmindedly. Wilford grunted and stomped back to his spot he had been sitting at the front of the boat.

Jephraim watched him go; his innards had gone cold and he was having a hard time focusing. He looked at the seax in front of him and he shivered at the thought of what things he would be forced to use it on. He felt the bile in the back of his throat and would have retched if he had left anything in his stomach from his last wave of seasickness.

“Land HO!” A voice shouted from up above. Jephraim struggled to stand, and after a few failed attempts managed to raise himself to a level where he could see over the side of the ship. A black dot had appeared on the horizon and the cold dread in his stomach twisted

tighter. A choked whisper fell from his lips as he named the dot. “Perditus”

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The cold water lapped at his inadequate boots that were riddled with holes, but Jephraim was shaking from something that had nothing to do with the ice-cold shallows in which he currently stood. The small ship which had carried them this far lay moored further out in the deeper seawater, presumably safe from the creatures that lay waiting for them in the shadows of the dilapidated buildings that were standing like huddled refugees on the surf torn cliffs before them. Captain Morticus turned towards his men.

“This will be a short mission, men, just to probe the resistance that we can expect and to test us as a team.” He spoke with the calm assurance that helped Jephraim to focus, the jarring cold and the steel in Morticus’s voice bringing a remote clarity to his vision. “Stick together, we do not get separated. There are only a few hours before sunset and we want to be back on that boat before then. Understand?”

The Captain looked around at the other four men to whom he was addressing. Berns stood next to the mute flagellant whom Wilford had named Rigo, both of whom nodded. Wilford smiled and responded with a casual “Aye.”

Morticus stared at Jephraim until he felt uncomfortable. Finally he opened his mouth to respond when something latched onto his ankle and wrenched him backwards into the freezing water.

Jephraim heard muffled shouts above the water but his thoughts were more preoccupied with the fingers that now clasped his foot. He kicked out with his free leg at a webbed face with huge overlapping scales. The kick was too panicked to cause any real harm, but it caused the creature to hesitate for a moment and in that split second Jephraim pulled his foot out of his trapped boot, leaving the useless bit of leather in the hands of his assailant.

Strong hands grabbed under his arms and pulled him heavily

upwards. Jephraim broke out of the water gasping for breath and flailed his arms as he tried to find his feet. There was shouting all around him and lots of splashing, he heard Morticus's voice above the din.

"Get to the beach! We cannot fight them in the water!" he cried. Jephraim looked up to see Rigo and Berns on either side of him, dragging him backwards towards the shore. Looking back he could see the Captain yelling as his blade stabbed downwards into the frigid water again and again. At one point there was a strangled cry that gurgled out of the water and when Morticus's blade pulled free of the water there was a black goo that clung to the steel.

Berns and Rigo dropped Jephraim onto the sand of the beach and turned to take up defensive stances against the lapping tidewaters. Wilford was already standing some few yards back with an axe in each hand. Berns pulled two curved blades out of his belt and took up a stance beside Rigo. Struggling to his feet, Jephraim huddled behind the two warriors and pulled his seax out of his own belt. There was some splashing and then Captain Morticus appeared out of the shallows.

"Prepare arms! Wilford! As soon as you see any one of those finned monsters you put an axe twixt their eyes! Got it?! You there! Thief! Get out from behind my soldiers and stand your ground! You stand here and watch my back, make sure that none of these beasts surround me! Move!" The Captain rushed forward and grabbed a sodden handful of Jephraim's shirt and pulled him forward towards the lapping tide.

They didn't have to wait long. Soon enough they came staggering out of the shallows. They were human sized, but with great fins extending out from their faces and scales covering their bodies. They shambled as if they did not have a good control of their limbs. Morticus sneered and bellowed challenges at them as they staggered forward.

When they were within a few feet Jephraim heard a whirring noise and suddenly an axe materialized in the skull of the closest creature. It gurgled something as it fell backwards into the water, staining the waves with a black ichor. The rest of the creatures

stalked forward, heedless of their fellow's demise.

Jephraim fought to control a rising panic in his throat as the first of the creatures surged forward into range of Morticus's sword arm. With a cry on his lips the captain whipped his blade forward and sliced the top of the closest creature's skull from the rest of its head. The beast fell backwards only to be replaced by two more which pawed at the Captain. Jephraim was frozen to the ground and couldn't move. He watched as Morticus dispatched one of the creatures while the other one raked its claws across his exposed face. The Captain staggered backwards and fell to his knees, all the while raising his shield to ward off further blows from the beast.

Jephraim could only watch in horror as the fish creature tore at Morticus's shield. Then cold, clammy hands gripped his shoulder and sharp teeth bit into the exposed flesh of his arm. This jarred Jephraim into action. Turning, he stabbed blindly at the creature that had its teeth embedded in his arm. It released its bite and staggered back, but not before Jephraim's seax cut through its left eye. Surprisingly this did not cause it to cry out in pain or even react in any visible way. The beast reached its hands out to claw at him, but the thief simply charged forward with a terrified cry on his lips. He slashed wildly and managed to score a direct hit on the creature's neck, his blade biting deep into the scaled flesh. The beast groaned and fell to the ground.

Turning, Jephraim spotted the Captain as he dispatched the previous creature. Jephraim began to walk towards Morticus but as he did so he felt a heavy weight tackle him from behind. Wriggling under the crushing body on top of him, Jephraim saw the scaly face of another creature as it clawed and bit at him. Crying out, he tried to put his hands up to defend his face and as he did so he saw a flash of metal and then black ichor sprayed out all over Jephraim's face and arms and the creature slid sideways off of his body, with its head rolling some feet away. Morticus stood over him with his hand held out. Grunting, Jephraim took it and pulled himself to his feet.

"Not bad, thief, next time be more mindful, however." The Captain nodded.

“Cap’n! Tha’ be tha last o’ em, methinks!” Wilford called out from down the shoreline. The Captain nodded and turned to look further out to sea. Jephraim saw his shoulders fall and tried to follow his gaze, when he did the breath leaked out of him and his shoulders sagged even further than that of the Captain.

“Damn…” Morticus muttered. He turned and bellowed to the other three men further down the coast. “Let’s move out! We need to find shelter for the night! Let’s go!”

Jephraim stared for a few moments longer, then shakily rose to his feet and staggered after the rest of the party. Out in the waters the ship that had brought them this far continued to burn as scaled bodies poured over the sides of the boat. The screams of the ship’s crew carried out over the blackened waves.

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Episode 3: Nightmares in the Dark

Jephraim shivered against the cold as he staggered behind Wilford’s jogging form in front of him. A cruel, bitter wind had swept up as the last rays of the setting sun had disappeared amongst the shadows of the run-down buildings through which they were now forced to flee. His already soaked clothing clung to him uncomfortably and caused him to clench his jaw so tightly that it was giving him a headache in order to stop his teeth from chattering. On top of that he had cut his foot running through the ruined streets and alleyways. Not for the first time he wished for his missing boot now lying somewhere in the shallows of the beach where they had landed, probably still clutched in the dead hands of one of those fish creatures that had attacked them.

He was forced to pull up short as Wilford stopped abruptly in front of him, almost causing Jephraim to charge into his back.

“What’s going on?” He whispered through stuttered gasps as his body began shivering instantly as soon as he stopped his staggering jog.

“The Cap’n did hold us up, though he di’ no say why. Quiet yer

chatterin'! It be hard eno' esscapin' those cree'churs on tha beach wi'oot yer bloody teeth given' oot a bloody drum beat fer them ta find us wit!" Wilford's voice hissed between his own tightly clenched teeth, his body also shivering slightly against the chill wind. Jephraim huddled down, trying to pull in the corners of his body so that the cold air couldn't touch him, but it was no use. No matter how he turned the wind cut through his wet clothes and set his body to shuddering violently. His fingers began to grow numb and his nose ran rivulets of liquid mucus down his lip. Jephraim could not remember ever being so miserable in his life and found himself fervently wishing that he was back on the boat that had carried them here, sailing anywhere but towards this cursed island.

After what felt like hours, the Captain reappeared and walked quickly over to the huddled group of his men, kneeling down to look at each of them. Neither the cold wind nor the long scratches across his face from the attack earlier seemed to affect him and he spoke with a calm, level voice.

"There is a building up ahead that has a fairly intact fireplace with a serviceable chimney. We'll camp there for the night and build a fire to get the life back in our limbs. The creatures seem to have lost our scent and mayhap we can march faster if we get some rest first." The group smiled faintly at one another and followed the Captain to a small, one room building that looked like the remnants of a poor family's dwelling.

A ruined bed lay collapsed on the floor with shattered and decayed bits of wood scattered about it and a moldy mattress that was torn and ragged. Apart from that there was a table in a similar state of decay at the other side of the room. About the only thing that was intact was a small stone fireplace against the south wall. Breaking up the bits of brittle wood from the ruined furniture, the small band was able to collect enough fuel to start a fire and they huddled about it for warmth as the small blaze sputtered and hissed in the stone alcove. The chimney wasn't completely cleared and so a large amount of the smoke drifted into the room, but none of the five men huddled together seemed to care much.

Rigo and Berns produced a few hardtack biscuits from their packs and broke them apart to pass around. It wasn't much of a meal, but the men were famished and devoured the morsels quickly. Jephraim

cast his eyes about for more afterwards but each of the other men was already wrapping themselves up in whatever they could find to help them stay warm. Captain Morticus nodded in Jephraim's direction.

"Go ahead and sleep, thief. We've had a long day and everyone needs the rest. I'll take first watch while everyone gets some rest. We'll wake you when it's your turn." With that, he turned his back on the already snoring shapes behind him to gaze out the window into the street. Jephraim wasn't certain that he could sleep after what he had witnessed, but he laid his head back anyways and without realizing it found himself drifting away within moments, his body relaxing with the warming presence of the small fire in the fireplace.

He awoke with a start several hours later. It was obvious that some time had lapsed as the fire had burned out and a chill silence lay over the sleeping party. No one had woken him, but something had called out to him from the realm of dreams to pull him back into the waking world, but he couldn't place what it was that had caused him to stir.

Staring bleary-eyed around the room it finally dawned on him that he couldn't see the Captain anywhere nearby. Rigo and Berns were huddled close together with Wilford lying a few feet away, snoring slightly. All three were still fast asleep, but Morticus was nowhere to be seen. The cold in the air tugged at Jephraim's bones, causing him to shake as it penetrated his still damp clothing.

The thief pushed himself to his feet and walked over to the fireplace to see about stoking the flames again and hopefully instilling some warmth back into the drafty room, but he was disappointed to see that the fire was long out and stone cold. Jephraim didn't have any way of lighting it, Morticus had been the one with the flint and he was gone for now. The thought that he may have been in danger, or that he had possibly abandoned the warriors never crossed Jephraim's mind; he doubted that Morticus even possessed the ability to consider such an action.

Shivering, the thief sat down on the ground and wrapped his arms about himself in an effort to stave off the chills that were causing

his violent shaking. He stared miserably into the dead ashes in the fireplace and pondered on his predicament. How had he come to this? What had he done that was so heinous that he deserved this hellish punishment? Perhaps he had slept with some women that he shouldn't have, and maybe he'd been too greedy when he took his "people's tax" from the coffers of certain government officials, but the punishment that he'd received seemed far heavier than all of his crimes put together would warrant.

As he sat wallowing in a pit of his own self-pity, there came a noise that tugged at his attention. He tried to ignore it and focus solely on his suffering, but the sound came again and this time he was far more certain of it. There was a distinct echo of metal being dragged across stone, and it was coming from the street just outside of the small building where the group lay sleeping.

Jephraim stood up slowly and crept towards the window looking out into the dark night. Nothing but shadows rested out in the pitch-black street. Jephraim strained his eyes to penetrate the darkness, willing whatever had made the sound to move again, waiting for the tell-tale signal of whatever it was that was moving out there in the night.

The sound came again, closer than before yet still some ways down the street. Jephraim pressed his face against the glass and stared towards the source of the noise. At first he saw nothing, but then the clouds parted allowing the sliver of moon that had hidden behind them to shine out and Jephraim saw three shapes shuffling through the dark. They were bowed as if carrying a heavy weight and as they drew closer the sound of metal being dragged along the stone streets grew louder, and with it came the accompanying rattling of metal pieces clicking together to make a sharp counterpoint to the dull weight being pulled along the ground.

The shapes continued to shamble down the street until they stopped beside the door leading into the small building where Jephraim and the others lay concealed. Being this close, Jephraim could now make out more of the creatures' features and his pulse quickened as he stared at them. They were human in shape, but they looked as though they had been carved up on a butcher's slab. Their skin was peeled away from their faces and rotten juices leaked out of their eye sockets where their eyes had dissolved away without lids to

cover them. Their cracked lips moved in constant susurrations that hadn't been audible beneath the noise of the chains that encircled each of the three wretched souls, binding them to a great metal ball that forced each of them to huddle close to the ground and drag its weight along the flagstones of the street. Black burn marks etched their way up each of their arms, which were also flayed so that the skin was pulled back to reveal naked muscles and sinews that wept a viscous fluid much like their eyes.

Jephraim clamped a hand over his mouth to keep himself from calling out. The movement must have caught one of the creature's attention because it raised its head, causing the chain around its neck to rattle against itself and jerked the other two towards it. The creatures continued to whisper amongst themselves while the one who had raised its head began to moan, softly at first but gradually growing until it was a cry of anguish that echoed through the forgotten streets and forbidden alleys of that forsaken city. Jephraim clamped his hands over his ears in an attempt to silence the cries that awakened a sickening hole in his stomach that turned and writhed within him so that he felt the need to answer the creature's call with one of his own.

Clamping his teeth shut, the thief struggled to push down the wrenching sadness and terror that was forcing its way up into his throat. He fell to his knees and closed his eyes tightly but it was no use. The creature's voice continued to rise mournfully across the silent streets and tore its way through Jephraim's chest. A wracking sob tore itself from his mouth and as it did so the other two creatures raised their terrible cries to match their bound companion. The sound tore itself through the room, Wilford awoke with a start and instantly began screaming as the awful noise awoke in him memories of violence, sadness, and loss. Rigo and Berns simply opened their eyes and lay as if paralyzed by the tortured cries, silent tears rolling out from their eyes that they could not close.

Abruptly the sound cut off and Jephraim fell to the floor in an exhausted heap, Wilford continued to scream. Rigo and Berns picked themselves up from the floor and moved to silence their screaming friend, while scrubbing their eyes with their hands. The door to their small refuge reverberated as it was struck, vibrating on its hinges as the ancient wood began to crack almost instantly.

Another blow struck the wood and a horrendous cracking noise announced the door's final protests as it fell inwards to crash against the floor. Jephraim stared numbly up at the trio of monsters as they shuffled through the door, their dry lips muttering under their breath as they pulled their weighted chains behind them. A voice in his brain screamed at him to move, but his limbs would not obey, and all he could do was stare as the creatures raised their hands and flame erupted across their ruined flesh.

The creatures shambled forward towards the closest target, that of Jephraim's prone form. He couldn't bring his hands to obey him, his limbs seemed to be made of lead and the world moved as if everything were travelling through a thick veil of water. His eyes began to close and his vision grew blurry. He watched as two shadows placed themselves between him and the bound monstrosities. He heard inhuman screams which threatened to push him down into a black abyss. His vision swam and he struggled to remain conscious. He heard a gurgled cry of pain followed by more impossible wails and then, abruptly, there was silence as stars exploded within his head and he fell into an impossibly dark hole that opened up beneath him.

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Episode 4: Memories of a Nightmare

When Jephraim opened his eyes, he found Morticus's face staring back at him.

"You're awake. Good. Can you stand?" The captain's face betrayed absolutely no emotion. Jephraim licked his lips, his tongue scratching across their dry surface. He tried to push himself up, but his limbs still felt leaden and all he managed to do was slip onto his side. Morticus helped to prop him back up into a sitting position.

"What happened?" Jephraim rasped.

"You were attacked by a type of demon we refer to as tortured souls." The captain glanced behind him at Berns kneeling over the prone form of Rigo as he wrapped a bandage around Rigo's waist to staunch a bleeding wound in his side. Rigo's face was blanched and

perspiring, while Berns's was strained with concentration, his lips pursed in nervous focus. Wilford sat in a dark corner of the hut, his legs hugged to his chest and his head resting on his knees. He was rocking slowly back and forth.

"You were lucky that Rigo and Berns were here, otherwise you would probably be dead." Morticus's voice was low as he continued. He held up a wineskin with water in it. Jephraim gulped greedily from the cool liquid, the water refreshing his limbs somewhat and allowing him to push himself into a more comfortable position.

"What were those things?" Jephraim's voice was husky as he spoke, as though he were speaking through a mouthful of honey. The effort caused his throat to burn.

"I told you, they were a type of demon we call tortured souls." Morticus didn't look at Jephraim as he spoke. "We're not exactly sure where they come from, but there are a lot of theories: they are the damned souls of those mortals foolish enough to venture into the Abyss, or they are the tortured remnants of Elohi who were burnt by the fires of those demons that dwell in that evil chasm."

"As for me, I think that they are the embodiment of all the cries of suffering that have gone up to the heavens, all the curses and the prayers for revenge of the hurt and dying given shape and sent to wreak havoc upon the mortals of this world. Their cries can dredge up the very worst nightmares you've ever dreamed. That's why Wilford is still incapacitated. He was asleep when they started screaming and wasn't able to brace himself against the memories. That's why you passed out, because you didn't even know what to expect."

"But I don't remember anything at all. Just a feeling of dread and then a numb sensation that seemed to spread all over my body." Jephraim coughed after speaking so many words in succession. He weakly reached for the wineskin full of water and the captain passed it over to him.

"Often times our worst memories, our greatest fears, if you will, are repressed because they've hurt us so deeply that our minds shut

down or deflect those memories when they come up. That explains the numb feeling and the vague sense of dread. Your body shut down rather than allow you to remember the fears that lurk deep inside your soul." Morticus shook his head slowly.

"You act as though you are familiar with that process." Jephraim arched an eyebrow. Morticus didn't speak at first.

"I was born into bloodshed," he said, his words low and quiet. "My mother died at my birth, but not due to complications that usually claim a mother's life. It was only a miracle that managed to save me, but it was an ominous way to start my time on this earth. My mother… hers was not a good end." Morticus sat back on his heels, seeming to stare off into the blank space before him. "Since then, I've seen my share of suffering. Some that I've given and some that I have received. The same as any man, I suppose."

"Oh?" Jephraim pressed, his curiosity piqued. Morticus shook his head slowly.

"I trust you a little more than that first day when we met, thief, but some things I do not speak of. Some things shouldn't be spoken of." Jephraim waited for a long moment, hoping that the captain would give some other hint or tidbit, but the moment passed and Morticus remained as stoic as ever. He sighed and looked over to see Berns sit back from working on Rigo's wound, patting the prone man on the chest. Rigo smiled weakly and closed his eyes softly. His chest rose only slightly and Jephraim had to focus intently to make sure that the man was even breathing at all.

"How is it that Rigo and Berns were unaffected by the demons?" Morticus blinked at Jephraim's question.

"Those two have been through far worse than anything you could imagine. They've conquered their demons a thousand times over. They still feel the horror that you felt at those cries, but they have learned how to deal with it, which is a good thing for you and a large part of the reason that I brought them with me." The captain shifted his weight slightly so as to better look at the thief.

"You know that they are brothers, right?" This revelation caused

Jephraim to start. Morticus nodded and continued. “When they were much, much younger, their village was attacked by Varangur cultists seeking sacrifices for some bloody ritual. Berns was out of town that day with their father, he being the eldest and all. When they returned to the town they found the burnt remnants of their home and their father joined the local band of men who were bent on seeking out the cultists and rescuing their loved ones who had been carried off, mostly wives and children. Their father forbade Berns from going with them, but he was a sneaky child and followed them anyways.

All that did was ensure that he was present to watch the slaughter that befell the men when they did catch up to the Varangur. That was nothing compared to what was to come. This was a battle, no matter how one-sided, and the deaths of those husbands and fathers was swift and violent. Berns was captured as he tried to flee the scene of the bloodshed and taken to join the other prisoners, where he found Rigo and his mother.

“They took the captives to a circle of stones with an altar in the middle and began sacrificing the women first. Rigo and Berns were forced to watch as they butchered their mother directly in front of them and at that moment something broke within Berns’s mind. He fell into a numb silence and when they were dragged before the altar he started to struggle and cry out. Rigo followed his lead, even managing to bite one of their captors' hands. The cultists didn’t take too kindly to this resistance and so cut their tongues out in order to silence them as they called out their protests.” Morticus paused here and tilted back his head. “That’s why they don’t speak except through hand signals.”

“How did they survive?” Jephraim’s face was twisted into a mask of horror, yet he couldn’t stop himself from asking the question. Morticus gave a dry laugh.

“Berns used the blood from his tongue to cause the ropes binding his hands to become slippery. Once they were slick, he pulled them free while the cultist performing the ritual had his back turned. He stabbed the fell priest through the heart with his own sacrificial dagger and sliced the throat of his personal guardsmen before they even realized he was free. Taking one of the guards' blades, he cut Rigo’s bonds with the dagger and they fled into the night. They

hadn’t gone far, though, before they decided to turn around and go back for the other prisoners.

“I don’t know how they did it. By all accounts they should have died a dozen times over, but somehow they snuck back into the camp and began a silent butchery of all the Varangur cultists there, somewhere between ten and fifteen barbarians. Perhaps they were tired from the fighting earlier in the day and weren’t paying attention. Maybe they had some kind of divine intervention. Or maybe the horrors they had been forced to endure caused a darkness to come over them and they became living embodiments of vengeance, much like those tortured souls.

“They freed the captives and accompanied them to the nearest settlement, which happened to be an outpost for our order. The brother who first saw them said they were a fearful sight, as they were covered in blood. Not only that, but they had a glassed-over look to their eyes, like a fire had burned out behind them. When he heard the account of the surviving villagers, he saw their potential and took them on as his wards, raising them up to be warriors within our order. That was over twenty years ago. I discovered them some eight years back and they have been by my side ever since.” Morticus sighed.

“They are like family to me.” He leaned in close to Jephraim’s face, his eyes burning holes through Jephraim's head. “That is why the demons' cries do not affect them the same way they do you. Rigo and Berns have faced their demons. They have the corpses to prove it. And the scars. They have not only faced their demons, but have emerged triumphant.” Morticus maintained his intense stare for a few more moments before leaning back again. Jephraim was quiet for several moments before speaking.

“What about Wilford?” He asked, indicating the huddled shape still rocking in the corner. Morticus closed his eyes and shrugged.

“You should ask him what horrors those cries dredge up from his past. That’s something he wouldn’t like sharing with just anyone and I’m not sure you’ve quite earned that confidence yet.”

“Surely it can’t be anything worse than what Rigo and Berns

experienced?"

"You make a fatal mistake in assuming that." Morticus turned his gaze on the prone form of Rigo. "There is no way to quantify suffering or pain when it is not physical. What one might endure with ease may be a ponderous weight to another, and some wounds that seem superficial are actually quite deep. What Wilford has suffered may not seem as terrible as Rigo and Berns's story, and in many ways it isn't, but what those brothers went through they've been able to compartmentalize. The cultists did not target them specifically -- they were almost like a force of nature, random and insensitive to personal needs or desires that they were destroying by their actions. They have been able to dehumanize them and reduce them to something more akin to animals in their eyes."

"It isn't the most healthy way of dealing with it, but they are able to function perhaps in spite of that, and that is a key element to their suffering and is why Wilford is so prone to these attacks. I will not tell you the details of his past, but this is a key, for how can anyone truly de-humanize their father? To do so would be to admit the possibility, however remote, that perhaps you are not human, either. After all, part of each parent lives on in each of their children." At this revelation Jephraim felt something stir within him, something achingly familiar that caused his own head to spin much like it had when the tortured souls had first appeared. He shook his head and felt a desperate need to change the subject.

"Captain, I believe this is the most that I've ever heard you speak." He tried to force a laugh, but it was choked in his suddenly constricted throat and came out as a strangled cry instead. The captain simply smiled and walked over to place his hand on Berns's shoulder, who looked up at his commander's concerned face and gave a small smile and a curt nod. Morticus squeezed his shoulder one more time before placing his back against the wall against which Berns reclined and sliding down to sit next to him.

"There are still a couple hours til dawn, thief, and we can't go anywhere until our comrades have recovered enough to move, so take the time to rest up and get some sleep. Where we are headed next, that might be an unattainable luxury for some time, so enjoy it while you can." Morticus spoke loudly enough for the whole room to hear, even though Jephraim was sure that neither Berns

nor Wilford would be sleeping much. Nor would the captain, so long as his men suffered.

The professional thief nodded and shifted to lay on his side. The world still seemed to be shifted at an unnatural angle, and his stomach still heaved against his ribs. He knew that sleep was likely impossible, but he closed his eyes anyways and thought about this ragged band of warriors into which he'd been drafted. He felt like an outsider. The worst that he could remember having to deal with before this adventure had been sneaking out of a bedroom without alerting a husband or father down the hall or occasionally missing a meal here and there between jobs. He gave a deep sigh and shifted uncomfortably as he thought about the strangers sitting or lying in this room on whom he depended for survival that even now sat nursing wounds of various depths.

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Episode 5: A morning with no dawn

The crack of thunder pulled Jephraim from his troubled dreams. He stared around at the huddled forms of his companions and listened to the heavy pattering of rain on the roof of the hut. A cold wind blew through the room that caused him to shudder and pull his limbs in closer to his body. His clothing was still damp from the battle that seemed like an eternity ago and it seemed to feed off the cold air to chill the marrow of his bones. Jephraim stared listlessly at the wall before him as he wondered what new tragedy was waiting to befall the beleaguered crew. He didn't have to wait long to find out.

The captain swept into the small hut from outside and shook the rain from his already soaked cloak, scattering drops onto the rest of the party. Jephraim barely noticed, his eyes struggling to focus on the captain's face when he spoke.

"The way is clear, so get ready to move out." The captain hesitated at the end, as if about to say more but cut himself short. He shook his head and walked over to help Rigo stand while his brother gathered their supplies and weapons. Wilford continued to sit with his knees pressed to his chest for a moment before grunting and

pushing himself onto his feet. He grabbed his axes and strode over to stand beside the door, peering into the stormy darkness beyond. Jephraim returned to staring at the wall, his eyes glazing over as he watched rivulets of rain pour through some of the small holes in the masonry until he felt a sharp pain in his back. Squirming, he turned around to see Morticus aiming a second kick to his ribs and he pushed himself back against the wall.

“I said get up, thief. I won’t ask again. We need to move and I cannot have your laziness dragging my men down. Stand up and let’s move.” The captain’s eyes were harder than flint and Jephraim unconsciously flinched back further into the wall before scrambling to his feet when this caused Morticus’s eyebrows to rise further up his brow and his foot to cock itself back once more in preparation of violence. Muttering to himself, the thief walked over to stand behind Berns, who was supporting the slumped form of his brother, Rigo, with his shoulder and gripping him around his waist. Rigo’s eyes were dull with pain, but he was conscious and aware of his surroundings so that when the captain gave the signal he was ready to move out as the small party dived into the stormy darkness.

Jephraim couldn’t fathom the storm. It felt as though they had spent the whole night in the hovel of a building where the demons had discovered them, but it was still dark as pitch outside. The howling rain drenched them almost immediately -- it was as if they had never had a chance to dry out from the previous day’s events and Jephraim felt the stinging pain of newly forming blisters creeping out from where his foot rubbed against the inside of his boot. The other foot he had wrapped in leather scraps that Wilford kept to wrap his axe handles with and the result was a crude shoe that was almost as painful as not having any kind of footwear at all.

The rather pitiful group pushed their way through twisting streets filled with dilapidated and crumbling buildings. They had to stop frequently in order to allow Rigo to rest and give his brother a chance to change his bandages. Jephraim made a mistake of looking at the wound when it was exposed during one such exchange and instantly regretted his decision. The wound was a bright red and it dug deep into Rigo’s side. Charred flesh from the demon’s attacks came away with the strips of bandage placed over top of it and caused Rigo to gurgle in pain as he fought back the primal urge to scream. After that experience the thief generally

tried to talk to Wilford while Berns performed his minor surgical miracle of keeping his brother alive. Wilford, however, was less talkative than the twins and refused to say much.

“Will this blasted night ever end?” Jephraim spat as the rain poured over the them. They were already drenched, so this was more of an inconvenience at this point than anything else. He was surprised, though, when his mohawked friend turned and broke the watery silence.

“It al’reddy ‘as, lad!” His gruff voice lacked the usual comfortingly mischievous tone. “It nearly be midday a’ this point. Tha’ rain do make it seem a’ though it be night, thoo. I gi’ ye that.” He turned and spat onto the ground before once more slumping into silence beside Jephraim and refusing to respond to any other attempts at conversation. After some time, the thief finally settled into the cold silence as it became more apparent that nobody wanted to talk in this dreary weather, or under such dire circumstances.

Time had no meaning in such a storm as this. There was no way to mark its passing besides the depth of the puddles through which the party was forced to cross on several occasions. Jephraim could not fathom how the captain knew which streets to take, or in what direction they should go as there was nothing there with which one could gather his bearings and form a specific route to follow. Yet Morticus was unwavering in his guidance. Taking them down street after street, each turn was done with confidence, every alley was selected as if it was plainly the obvious path to take. Without the sun to guide them, the rest of the party was at his mercy in this regard.

Several times it felt as though something was watching them. A presence that was almost palpable, as if all they needed to do was stop abruptly and the unseen observer would come crashing into their back. Jephraim’s shoulder blades itched from these unseen eyes and he wondered, not for the first time, whether they were real or just his imagination playing tricks on him from last night. Finally, he could bear it no longer and when the party stopped to tend to Rigo, Jephraim stepped in close to Morticus’s side and whispered to him.

“I think that something is following us.” Morticus’s face flickered for a moment, displacing confidence with something akin to worry before being replaced with his stony mask once more.

“I know,” he replied. This time it was Jephraim’s turn to feel shocked.

“You know?” He asked, shocked. “Then what are we going to do about it?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, superb! So we just sit here and wait for it to attack us?”

“Are you even sure that it will?”

“I’m more confident that it will than that it will leave us be for much longer. We need to act now!”

“No.” Morticus turned to walk away, but Jephraim reached out and grabbed his arm to refuse him.

“What do you mean no? This thing is likely dangerous! It might be able to finish what those Tortured Souls started! We can’t just ignore it!” He hissed. Morticus turned his head to stare at Jephraim’s hand on his arm. Then he looked up and the fire in his eyes caused the thief to release his grip.

“What would you have me do?” Morticus growled. “I have a man who is injured, a halfwit thief who is barely capable of not killing himself in a fight, and two exhausted soldiers that are emotionally and physically drained! Whatever this thing is that is following us, it obviously thinks that it can win a fight, or else it wouldn’t be stalking us, but it isn’t sure yet. We are close to our destination now, and if we keep moving there’s a good chance we can reach the docks where the Brotherhood maintains a presence and where we can get Rigo the help that he needs.” Morticus took a step towards Jephraim, who took a step back reflexively, shrinking away from the captain’s accusing stare.

“I tell you, thief, I brought you on this expedition because I felt you

might benefit our efforts, but if you question me again, or try to tell me what I should do, I will leave you by the wayside to fend for yourself in this forsaken place! If you threaten the lives of my men, I will kill you personally. Is that understood?" Jephraim gave the barest nod of his head. His eyes were pinned to the captain's chest and he felt as though that small movement was as loud as a shout in the pouring rain. Morticus grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him in even closer so that the heat of his breath washed over Jephraim's face as he spoke next.

"Look me in the eye, now." The thief felt his neck creak from the effort of complying with this command. Morticus's eyes boiled as he spoke. "Let me dispel any notion from your mind of doing anything rash, either. If you do anything to jeopardize my men's safety, or if you try to stab me in the back, you had better make sure that I am good and dead. Because if I am not and you try to run, there is not a rock big enough for you to hide under where I will not find you and the horrors that those Tortured Souls conjured up inside of you will be nothing compared to the creativeness that my wrath will have upon your sodden corpse. Got it?" Jephraim could only blink in response, but this seemed to satisfy the captain, who simply pushed him away and walked back over to check on Rigo. Jephraim stared at his back for a few moments before turning around to find Wilford smiling at him.

"I see you're feeling better." Jephraim spat at the raggedy man, which only made the smile broaden.

"Tha cap'n do have a way aboot 'im, don' he?" Wilford's voice was still sad, which clashed horribly with the expression on his face, causing the melancholy of the darkened sky above them to deepen.

"I don't want to hear about it, okay?" Jephraim shook his head. His cheeks were hot and he stamped away from the still-grinning Wilford. He walked several feet away from the group in an effort to cool his own temper and embarrassment at what had happened. In his distraction, however, he failed to realize just how far he had walked until he looked up several minutes later and found himself completely alone and unsure of how he had gotten to where he was. The creeping sensation of being watched increased and he gripped his chest as his breathing sped up. He whirled about in an effort to try and discern which way he had come from, but this only

succeeding in helping him to further lose his sense of direction. His pulse quickened. Then his eyes lit on something stirring in the shadows.

Jephraim took a step back as a hulking shape materialized out of the darkness. It had three heads that growled and snapped at the air. In the gloomy light of the storm-lit afternoon Jephraim could just make out the general appearance of a large dog of some sort, each of its snouts baring glistening white teeth. It moved forward on musclebound legs of sinew and torn skin and Jephraim shrank away from the beast and fumbled for the weapon at his waist, his fingers struggling to wrap around the hilt of his blade.

With a sudden burst of speed, the three-headed dog launched itself at him, tackling him to the ground, where each of the three heads fought for a chance to tear at his flesh. Jephraim screamed as teeth raked across his face, fire following their trail across his skin as he struggled to push the fangs away. As abruptly as the creature had attacked, it suddenly stopped and arched its back, giving out a sharp howl as it did so before toppling down on top of Jephraim, threatening to crush him beneath its massive bulk.

Grunting in pain and exertion, Jephraim forced his way out from underneath the three-headed corpse and found himself staring at a pair of feet he was all too familiar with.

“Get up, thief!” Morticus’s voice was loud and clear and it rang out in the heavy rain-soaked alleyway. Jephraim cringed at the sound before the captain reached down and grabbed him by the back of his cloak, wrenching him to his feet. Jephraim saw the Captain’s blood soaked sword in his hand and flinched back at the sudden movement of being stood upright.

“We need to go, thief! Now!” the captain yelled in Jephraim’s face and then turned, dragging him along with the motion. He began running down the alleyway with the thief being dragged bodily behind him. In his terror, Jephraim was only vaguely aware of other shapes taking form in the darkness. Lithe, supple bodies called out from the shadows after him. Horned heads wreathed in fire bellowed challenges at their retreating backs.

“We need to get to the docks! That’s our best chance. The others should already be there by now, and if we hurry the other members of our Order might be able to…” The Captain’s voice trailed off as they rounded a bend that should have led them to the quay where the hopeful reinforcements could be found. Jephraim’s heart sunk as he took in the sight that greeted them: Rigo, Berns, and Wilford all stood there waiting for them, but at their feet lay the charred bodies of several men, with more corpses laid out behind them and the distinct odor of burning flesh lingering in the air.

The docks were still there, but the Brotherhood outpost had been burned to the ground, along with all the soldiers garrisoning it.

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Episode 6: The Badge of Cowardice

“Form up!” Morticus bellowed as he and Jephraim raced out of the enclosed alleyways, towards the ransacked docks where the rest of their band stood amongst the corpses of the Brotherhood’s garrison. The men scrambled as best they could to set up something resembling a battle line. Rigo slumped to his knees, holding himself up with his shield while his other hand gripped limply at the sword at his waist. Berns pulled his blades free and stepped into a defensive position in front of his Brother, and Wilford had already positioned himself behind them with twin axes held at the ready.

Behind them, Jephraim could hear the approaching horrors as they snarled and snapped their teeth at their heels as they raced towards the feeble promise of safety their cohorts provided. Something growled as it chased them and collided into Rigo’s shield as Morticus and Jephraim sped past. The growl turned into a whimper as Berns’s swords flashed, followed by the sound of wet meat slapping the ground.

Jephraim tried to keep running but the Captain's hand on his shoulder spun him about to face the nightmare displayed before them.

“You have no place to run to, thief! Either stand and fight or try swimming to the coast, there is no other option!” the Captain

wrenched him forward and planted his feet beside Jephraim, drawing his sword he stepped to the side and slid his blade clean through the stomach of some red-skinned monstrosity as it tried to crush the thief beneath an enormous cudgel. The creature fell heavily but there were several more to take its place. Massive, three headed dogs came bounding towards him and he stepped back in fright.

“Stand and fight, man! Draw your weapon!” Morticus’s voice tore through Jephraim’s indecision and he fumbled for the long knife at his waist. He raised the blade reflexively as one of the infernal mastiffs pounced on him and by pure luck alone the creature’s momentum impaled itself on the point of his seax. The weight of the dog’s corpse pulled the hilt of his weapon from his hand and sent him flying backwards to avoid being crushed beneath the body. The thief tried to find his bearings as he backpedaled but the slick stones underneath his cut and bandaged feet slid out from under him and he found himself sprawled across the ground.

He stared up into the glowing red eyes of another red-skinned demon, this one much smaller than the one that had tried to crush him moments before and in its hand it held a long, cruel shaped sword that seemed to flicker as if a living flame. The demon raised its weapon above its head to strike at Jephraim’s head and he screamed while raising his hands in a feeble attempt to ward off the coming blow. A sudden whooshing noise and a breath of air past just over Jephraim’s scalp and suddenly an axe appeared, embedded in the demon’s chest. The demon stared at the weapon even as its life flickered away and it tumbled to the flagstones.

Jephraim pushed himself to his feet as the sounds of more struggles continued to erupt around him. He heard voices shouting but he couldn’t make out what they were saying. He stared straight ahead at several more of the demonic attackers as they pressed forward. He watched as Rigo went down under the weight of three infernal swordsmen, their blades trading blows with Rigo’s own sword even as he fell. Jephraim stared in wonder at the red hue the stones had taken from all the gore being spilled, his eyes refused to focus.

Suddenly something spun him around by his shoulder and he found himself face to face with Wilford for a blinding second before something collided with the side of his face, throwing him to the

ground as stars exploded in his vision.

“Git offa yor duff, ya coo’ard!” Jephraim heard the familiar accent of his friend and somehow registered that he had just been struck by the mohawked man. The world snapped back into focus, and with it the fear of what they were facing. Jephraim cast his eyes about for his weapon, but couldn’t see it anywhere. A wooden handle appeared before his eyes and he looked up to see Wilford proffering the extended haft of one of his axes.

“Tak’ tha bloody thing!” He growled “Make use a yer’self, and dinnae jus sit thar!” Jephraim grasped the handle and pushed himself to his feet to stare at the bloody business occurring mere feet from where he had just lain. The bodies of six demons lay prostrate on the ground at the feet of Morticus and Berns as they waded through the opposition of their enemies with seemingly flawless precision. Behind this pocket of violence lay what appeared to be two more demons, each one with an axe embedded in their chest or head. Wilford was bellowing challenges and curses with each axe he let fly from behind the thief. He couldn’t find Rigo anywhere.

Hefting the hand axe, Jephraim tried to force his feet to advance towards where the Captain and Berns were fighting, but his limbs seemed to be made of stone and refused to obey his half-hearted commands. Somehow he managed to stagger a few feet forwards as a choking sound emitted from his throat. Before he could go much further, he found himself facing another of the demonic beasts, this one wielding a sword much like the last one that had attacked him.

Jephraim raised the axe and swung in a feeble attempt to put distance between himself and the demon in front of him. The creature flicked aside the blow and advanced forward a step to strike Jephraim across the face with the back of its clawed hand, throwing him back a few steps and causing him to drop the axe as he did so. The thief fell to the ground, holding his hands up in supplication as he sobbed for his life. The demon seemed to chuckle as it moved forward to strike the thief’s head from his shoulders.

Once again fate intervened as there was a sudden cracking sound accompanied by the sight of a blade punching through the demon’s

throat and it collapsed with a look of surprise etched onto its dying features. Standing behind the demon was the battered form of Morticus, and behind him lay the dead or retreating forms of the other Abyssal attackers. Berns lay prone on the ground with an open wound on his forehead. Wilford cried out and ran over to his friend.

“He’s fine Wilford. I checked on him before coming over to save this worthless lump of skin. It’s just a scratch. He cracked his head on the ground when he fell, but he’ll be fine.” Morticus’s eyes didn’t leave Jephraim’s the entire time he spoke.

“Whar be Rigo? I dinnae see ‘im!” Wilford’s voice grew in panic as he spoke.

“They took him.” Morticus called out.

“Wha’ do ya mean, they took him?” Wilford asked.

“I didn’t know that demons took prisoners.” Jephraim asked, his attention completely centered on the Captain and his still-raised sword.

“They don’t.” Morticus said.

“Cap’n, wha’ do be goin’ on?” Wilford, after checking on Berns was now closing on where the Captain stood.

“They took him to make sure that we… no, that *I* would follow.” Morticus finally lowered his gaze and sighed.

“What do you mean? Why would they want you to follow them?” Jephraim questioned.

“Lots of reasons.” The Captain shook his head, and when Jephraim raised an eyebrow he growled “Lots of *personal* reasons.”

“Cap’n?” Wilford stared at Morticus for a moment. The Captain sighed again and then he raised his eyes to the still overcast sky above. When he spoke, it was in a tired voice.

“I think it’s time I told you the real reason I came to Perditus, and why you all are here.”

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Episode 7: Secrets and Sacrifices

“I was born under… unusual circumstances.” Morticus began while Jephraim and Wilford leaned against the charred remains of wooden posts from the docks while Berns lay motionless off to the side breathing shallowly.

“My parents were not from this world, at least not originally. They were both from a world that was destroyed in some distant corner of the dark knight where the stars refuse to shine anymore. Their world was destroyed through blatant ignorance and audacious vanity yet somehow they were able to escape. The manner in which they did this was to travel through the realm of horrors. They literally travelled through hell in an effort to find a new home as theirs was ripped to shreds behind them.” Morticus sighed and lowered himself onto his heels to stare at the ground.

“But before they made good this escape, before they entered the nightmarish plane, I was conceived unbeknownst to them. My mother was an elven sorceress, and my father was a human knight. Normally such things would never have happened, but the world was ending and they sought comfort in each other’s arms and I was the result of that comfort. Something happened as my mother carried me in her womb through the realm of death that eventually lead to this world. She still didn’t know that she was pregnant with me and it was she who cast the enchantments that allowed both her and my father, along with their followers and allies, to pass through to this world, but channeling such a great amount of magic and the very essence of the hell through which they passed caused her pregnancy to have certain… complications.”

“Like what?” Jephraim asked.

“For one it expedited the process. My mother gave birth to me only 4 months after entering this world. For another it had an unexpected effect on me as well. I have an affinity for the demonic

resonance. This is something that I didn't learn about till much later, but I assume that it has something to do with the horrible realm being the place where I first began to grow within my mother's womb that did it to me. I can sense the presence of things touched by the Abyss, I can feel the pull of their tainted voices calling out to me, and the wrongness of their existence on this plain. Ever since I was young I heard whispers, taunts, suggestions, promises, all inaudible to anyone else but always present in my mind, as if something were trying to convince me to do things, terrible things." Morticus stared at the ground long and hard before continuing to speak.

"My father was the first one to notice that something was wrong. He found me one day after I had taken the butcher's dog and sliced it open from navel to groin and was picking through its entrails. I was only five years old and the voices had told me that there was a special treat for me, but that it was inside the dog's belly and I had to get it out quickly or it wouldn't be any good. I was looking for my treat when I heard my father's footsteps behind me and his voice call out my name." Morticus's voice began to shake and he took a deep shuddering breath before returning to his tale.

"My father was a brave man, I grew up hearing tales of his bravery: that he once fought off an entire regiment of abyssal fiends without faltering, even laughing as he did so. That he had walked through hell and that now the demons of that place feared him. The man was a legend in his own right amongst his troops and his friends. He was fearless. But that day I saw terror in his eyes as he whirled me about to face him. I giggled because I thought it was all a game and placed my hands, scarlet with the dog's blood, on either side of his face and squealed with delight at how fast he had picked me up. Then my father did something that seared the event into my mind forever: he wept." Another long pause filled with silence enshrouded the small group as they sat listening and waiting for what came next.

"Before I was born, my mother was visited by the patron of our order, a Shining One who prophesied that if my mother decided to give me life that my destiny would be a great one but that it was unclear if that would be for good or ill. And so after I was born my father set himself to watch me and swore that if it seemed that I was falling down the wrong path that he would personally see to it

to rectify my mother's mistake if it came to it. But then something happened that he hadn't hoped or expected. He came to love me as his son. My mother died in childbirth, sacrificing her life for mine, and for a long time my father resented me for that. But then he began to see little pieces of her in me, small mannerisms, the color of my eyes, even a similar sense of humor. I became a hurtful reminder of the love he had lost and while painful he felt some reassurance that some part of her lived on in me.

"This small admission opened the floodgates. He grew to care and eventually love the little boy that I was and convinced himself that the circumstances around my conception and growth would not adversely affect me. So thorough was his own deception that he refused to acknowledge the small signs that something was wrong. Little things I would say, the violent tantrums when I would get mad that often ended in violence, these things he carefully ignored and justified so as to appease his conscience. But when he was confronted with the harsh evidence of what was before him that day with the corpse of the butcher's pet at my feet and my clothes covered in the crimson juices of its body, even he couldn't deny that. And this broke him."

Morticus stopped and pushed himself to his feet. Reaching over he pulled his glove off his left hand. Jephraim realized at that moment that the Captain's right hand had always been wrapped in leather strips and cloth which he had never seen him remove until this moment when the Captain started to unwind the animal hide. After the coverings fell away, Jephraim gasped at what he beheld: The Captain's right hand was completely encased within a shining golden gauntlet that shimmered even in the gloomy light of Perditus's dark afternoon. The metalwork was exceedingly fine with intricate symbols etched into the metal that seemed to glow with a warm light.

"This was my father's." Morticus spoke softly as he stared at his mailed fist. "Shortly after arriving in this world, but before I was born my father fought with a horde of demons that were attempting to take something precious from my father and his followers. In this fight my father was wounded by a strange sorcerous fire that caused his flesh to warp and flow like candle wax. He was only injured on his right hand, which was fortunate in its own way, as there were several men who were encased in this flame and their fates were

much worse than his, at least at that time.

“Again the patron of our Order stepped in and fashioned suits of armor made out of Starmetal, a rare substance which is usually what draws would-be explorers here to the Star-Struck City due to its ability to hold enchantments. Our patron placed each of the wounded men in these suits and enchanted them with the ability to stay the warping powers of the cursed flame. He then crafted this gauntlet with the same properties to stave off the evil energies that had embedded themselves in my father’s hand, warning him that should he remove it that the powers would renew their assault and his body would succumb to the foul sorceries.

“When my father saw me that day with the dog he knew that his worst fears had been confirmed and so he set about finding a solution that wouldn’t require my immediate demise. The first solution he came about naturally was that his gauntlet could stop the chaotic powers from influencing me, but knowing what that would cost he set about trying to find an alternative. Three years passed by as I slowly slipped further into an abyssal hole of madness. The voices within my head urged me to darker and darker deeds and I found my child’s mind unable to resist the promptings I received. I did unspeakable things before my father had me chained to a wall and placed under constant guard to stop me from wandering about with my cursed inclinations bouncing about in my small head. Each day my father became more and more sure that there was only one solution to my curse.

“I do not remember the specifics, but I’ve been told that my father had me brought to the center of a cathedral dedicated to our patron where he had me bound and one of our Devoted priestesses cast the spell of unbinding on my father’s gauntlet causing it to slide free revealing a terrible and mutilated claw where his hand had once been. Quickly they affixed the gauntlet to my own hand and bound it there. I do remember that at this moment the whispers ceased outright and my vision cleared.

“I called out for my father, and he smiled even as his own eyes clouded over in pain and the cursed flesh of his hand began rippling in its new found freedom. It quickly spread upwards, consuming my father entirely. I remember the screams of pain as he wailed for the end. His close friend, an elven prince who came from the same old

world and journeyed through the nightmare realm with my parents, he was the one to end my father's cursed existence. He stepped forward and ran my father through before my very eyes. Then he departed and I have never seen him since." Morticus raised his golden hand to eye level.

"Since then, I have dedicated myself to eradicating those Abyssal demons that I can and for years I have had that as my sole purpose for life. But within the past several months I have felt a pull towards this cursed city. Something strong has been calling out to me, something strong enough to reach me even through the gauntlet's enchantment and so I came here with the pretense of claiming a shipment of Starmetal for the Order, but in reality I had an ulterior motive. I came to investigate what it was that was pulling me to this place. Last night I disappeared to try and investigate further and I was drawn to an old tower towards the older parts of these ruins. What I found there terrifies me and was the reason for my haste to return to the safety of the Brotherhood's outpost on the mainland as quickly as possible."

"What did you find?" Jephraim's face was stone solemn as he asked his question.

"I discovered a dark ritual being performed by a sickly demon with red skin so dark it appeared the color of dried blood. He was chanting something in his infernal tongue which I couldn't understand, but it caused the gauntlet on my hand to burn with a low heat and my head to begin spinning. The ritual was something terrible as I saw the remains of several victims and a great sphere of energy pulsating in the middle of a circular room where the rite was taking place. I found myself unable to move and as the ritual reached its peak I noticed the sphere grow larger all the while the heat in the room grew more intense. The victims' remains burst into flame and sparks of raw magical energy flew through the air. Suddenly there was a large crack of thunder followed by a deafening silence and absolute darkness." Morticus sighed deeply.

"When a few minutes passed a light flickered into being on the staff of the sickly demon's staff that barely illuminated the room, but it was enough to make out a figure kneeling in the center where the sphere of power had been moments before. The strange pull I had felt before started up once more and this time it was all I could do

to keep myself from walking forward out of my hiding place and embracing this kneeling figure. I still could not understand what was causing this pull on me until I saw the figure stand and then it all became clear when I saw his face." Morticus fell silent.

"What were it 'bout 'is face, Cap'n?" Wilford's voice spoke in a dark tone. Morticus opened his mouth to reply but closed it after a few moments of silence. Surprisingly it was Jephraim who answered the question, and in his voice rested a note of sincere sympathy.

"It was your father, wasn't it?" There was no accusation, no anger, and no blame in his words. Indeed Jephraim's voice was soft and he shook his head in sympathy. Morticus's silence was all the answer that was needed.

"That's why they took Rigo, isn't it?" Jephraim continued. "He wants you to come to him, doesn't he? He knows you won't leave a man abandoned, because that's what he taught you." The Captain nodded slowly and rose to his feet. He walked over and stood by the docks staring at the gray water as it lapped against the stones and wood that made up the quay.

"I want you all to stay here until either I get back with Rigo, or the Brotherhood sends another ship to find out what happened to this outpost." He spoke at length without turning to face them. Both Wilford and Jephraim sat for a moment without speaking.

"But ye cannae!..." Wilford began before the Captain turned his gaze on him and he fell into silence automatically. Jephraim on the other hand stood up slowly and walked over to one of the demon bodies with one of Wilford's axes embedded in its chest and pulled it free. Without speaking he slid the weapon into his belt and then stepped forward towards another demon corpse and pulled another axe free from its broken skull.

"What are you doing, thief?" The Captain's voice had regained its rough edge.

"You can't hope to accomplish this task alone, and you can't trust me to sit with Berns while you take Wilford and go on this suicide mission, so it looks like you're stuck with me." A glint of steel

caught Jephraim's eye and he reached down to pick up his long bladed seax from the ground.

"I won't have you following after me and getting yourself killed." Morticus began walking towards him with his hands raised.

"As I see it, you have no real choice. You can't subdue me without wasting more time than you have, and I'm not backing down." Jephraim's eyes watered as he strained to match the Captain's stare.

"Why are you doing this?" Morticus questioned at length. "Not half an hour ago you were threatening me and now you're willing to risk your life to help save one of my men? You are no hero. I've seen you in battle, thief, you are a coward, despite the show you are making right now. What is your angle here?" Instead of responding Jephraim slid the seax into its sheath at his belt and lowered his gaze.

"I have my reasons," he said finally ", and if we are going to catch that band of demons that has taken your soldier, we need to go, now." There was something different in his voice this time. An edge of steel that cut away Morticus's doubts. It was such an unexpected thing that the Captain had to stare at him a moment longer before nodding. Then he turned and picked up his own weapons and together the thief and the Captain set off at an easy jog back into the heart of the cursed city. Behind them a bewildered Wilford and an unconscious Berns shrank slowly from view until they were lost amidst the twisting streets of the Star Struck City.

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Episode 8: With open arms

"Why are you here?" The voice reverberated through Jephraim's skull and set his teeth on edge. He tried to open his eyes, but when he did a blinding red light forced them to close again and set another wave of nausea through his stomach. A sharp pressure to his abdomen caused him to cry out as a horned foot made contact with his exposed ribs.

"I'll ask you once more." The voice purred, it belonged in the throat

of a beautiful woman rather than the monstrosity that the thief knew was staring down at him. “Why are you here?”

“Water!” Jephraim croaked from behind cracked lips. This caused a dry chuckle to escape his tormentor’s silken throat. She knelt down beside him, drawing a clawed fingernail across his cheek in a caress that left a bloody red line wherever it traced. Jephraim shuddered under her touch.

“My dear, the only relief you’ll receive from me is a swift death *if* you answer my questions to my satisfaction and even that isn’t much of a promise as I’m not sure what kind of mood I’ll be in when we’re finish. The only thing you should know at this point is that you will not die until after you’ve divulged all of your secrets to me, and until you die you will continue to suffer.”

Jephraim tried to push away the blurry cotton that filled his mind and blinded his memory. How had he come to this place? What was he doing here? He’d remembered running, and the taste of fear in his mouth as he’d been sick on the side of the road. Then there was a memory of falling. What had happened?

If his aching muscles would’ve allowed it he would have sat bolt upright as a single thought tore through his addled mind: The Captain! The title slipped from his bloodied lips as the demoness aimed another blow to his exposed ribs. The deformed foot stopped mid kick and the temptress cocked her head to one side.

“What was that my pet?” She brought her face close to his own and waited for his response.

“He’s behind you!” Jephraim whispered as his mouth split into a grin and he let out a screeching laugh. The demon stared at him in surprise for a split second in confused shock before screaming as the tip of a blade tore through her chest. As she fell to the ground the Captain stood up slowly, cleaning his blade on her already cooling corpse before moving around to help Jephraim to his feet.

“Well, they know we’re here now.” The Captain grunted while catching the thief who was beginning to topple forward again. “Can you stand?” Taking a deep breath, Jephraim closed his eyes and

took several deep breaths while he waited for the ground to stop spinning beneath him.

“What happened?” He croaked once the dizziness had subsided a little.

“You don’t remember?” Morticus looked sideways at him, “You must’ve hit your head pretty hard. We were sneaking into the tower where I last saw my father and you put your weight on a faulty step and went crashing down into the middle of their ritual. I was afraid that you were dead, but then I heard them give the order to take you into this side room for questioning and I figured there was no point in questioning a corpse so I waited until the others left then snuck in here to save you. Problem is going to be getting you out of here.”

Jephraim staggered again and leaned heavily against the Captain’s side. He mumbled an apology and tried to right himself but the floor refused to acknowledge his feet and he slid back onto the ground. His eyes rattled in his skull and in the jarring silence that followed his collapse he began to hear whispers in the shadowed alcoves of the decrepit room where he lay.

You were always a disappointment. He heard a voice whisper the accusation and felt the accompanying rush of gut wrenching adrenaline. His pupils rolled as they tried to focus on the source of the voice, latching on to disjointed sounds that seemed to emanate more from his own fevered mind than from any hollowed out space surrounding him.

Even now you can’t separate the voices in your head from the reality that’s staring you directly in the face. The voice laughed and Jephraim groaned as he gripped his head in his hands and slid slowly to the ground in a torpid stupor. His vision blurred and he felt Morticus’s hand shaking him, but it felt as though it were a memory, intangible as mist and further away than simply his shoulder. *Your friend is calling out to you, but he cannot save you. You have come willingly into my arms, like you did when you were little when I told you to. Even now you obey my summons, don’t you? You have no choice.*

“No!” Jephraim called out and some echo in the back of his mind

seemed to register Morticus's voice shushing him. His vision clouded over with smoke as the shadows around him wriggled and writhed their way together to form a solid shape before his eyes. He couldn't see Morticus anywhere, but neither could he tear his eyes away from the shadow figure before him, he recognized the stooped shoulders and the broad-knuckled hands that hung low over the dark hips that stood now before him. The voice gathered itself and projected out from the swirling smoke that formed a mouth whose lips twisted into a vile smile.

That's right, my boy, call out just like you did when you were little. See how no one comes to your rescue? You will bleed, boy, you know how this all ends. Only this time there'll be no one there to stop me. That damn woman didn't suffer near enough for what she did to me, and neither did you. The smoke moved forward on legs that swirled as if blown about by a wind only it could sense. The smile on its face spread into a grin and two glowing, red eyes appeared to float above to mirror its insidious glee. *She may be gone, but at last I'll have my satisfaction with you, now won't I?* The creature laughed as it drew closer, close enough for its shadowed limbs to reach out and brush against Jephraim's legs. The thief recoiled back against the pillar behind him.

"Please, no! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!" Choked sobs wrenched themselves out of Jephraim's throat and hot tears fell from his red eyes. He'd refused to answer Morticus when he'd asked why the thief had been so willing to go with him back into the city to try and rescue Rigo. The shadow creature reared its head back and laughed, a hissing sound that caused the other, natural shadows to flicker like the light of a candle. Jephraim tried to press himself further into the stone pillar at his back as his eyes darted desperately around the room, unable to fix on any single thing for long.

Horns sprouted from the head of the shadow figure, extending out so high that it seemed impossible that they did not scrape the ceiling. Its fingers extended out and curled into sharp talons and its back hunched over as more bony extrusions seemed to explode out of its back. Yet even as it changed shape Jephraim could not mistake its identity. It was the reason that he had agreed to come back with Morticus, it was why he hadn't hesitated when faced with the dangerous task ahead. He knew the horrors of what Morticus

was going to face, he'd already faced them himself and had failed before. That failure had cost his mother her life and had haunted him all his days, driving him from the arms of one lover after another, one thieving score and then another, each one in pursuit of a way to silence this demon that even now hovered before him. Jephraim knew all too well the demons of the type Morticus had described. He realized that the Tortured Souls had almost torn through his defenses to remind him of this pain, but he had been able to stop it by falling unconscious. Now the blessed oblivion refused to come, stubbornly it lay just out of reach behind the iron doors of the present.

As the shadows began to stretch out their smoke-filled tendrils towards him, Jephraim finally looked straight on towards the figure before him and whispered its name.

"Father… I'm sorry!"

The shadow paused at this utterance and seemed to tilt its head to the side. *You're sorry!?* Its voice grated out throw the terrible, sharp teeth protruding from its lip. *You think that pity will save you? You think that I care one whit about your apologies? You killed me, boy! All because you wouldn't man up and take responsibility for your actions. All because you let your mother take your punishment for you! You are a coward! You hide behind women! You take what is not yours! You do this and you think that there would never be a reckoning? Think back boy! Remember your shame!*

Jephraim remembered alright, it was a familiar memory that always hovered just beneath his eyelids whenever he shut his eyes to sleep. The flames were painted there in the crimson hues of shame. The screams of his mother as she tried to put herself in between the ferocious blows of her drunken husband and her terrified son. He remembered the snapping sound of her neck when she fell after his father had pushed her aside in his anger. He remembered the pain and the anger he had felt as he saw his mother's body go slack, the way his father had stopped his rain of blows down on him and had turned to look at his wife's now corpse. He remembered his father's tears as he had stooped to pick her up and watched as her head and limbs fell limply across him as his drunkard of a parent pulled her broken form towards him all the while sobbing at what had happened.

He remembered taking something heavy and while his father's back was turned to him in grief as he sobbed over the woman he'd loved and killed he had crept up behind him and slammed the heavy object over and over again over his father's skull until crimson spray had painted the dirt floor of their cottage in a bloody mess. He remembered the heat of the flames from lighting their home on fire and watching it burn, even allowing some of the flames to scorch his flesh in order to make his story more convincing to the rest of the village when they came running to see what had caused the fire. He remembered the hushed whispers by his recovery bedside: a candle must have caught a curtain on fire, it was decided, poor boy barely made it out alive and his parents… A damn shame, it was said, a poor, damn shame.

"I'm sorry, Father, I'm sorry for Mother, too." Jephraim's voice was a husky echo that felt hollow in the shadowed cavern of a room where he now sat. The shadow loomed over him, its burning red eyes boring through the top of his skull.

That's not good enough. The shadow hissed. *I am owed more than your shallow apology.* It raised its clawed fist above its head, readying to bring it crashing down on Jephraim's bowed head. Jephraim sighed deeply, his body seemed to uncoil and relax. He nodded.

"Stop!" A voice called out, and out of the darkness a beam of light fell across the shadow, causing it to hiss and stumble backwards. Another shape seemed to step out of this shaft of light and stared down at Jephraim.

"Stand up my son!" The voice rang out again. "Stand up and face this monster! My death is not your fault! Stand up to him! Face him! He cannot stand against us both!" Something clattered next to the thief's foot and he reached down to touch the hilt of his seax. His numb fingers held the weapon before his eyes and he stared at it in wonder. He was sure he had lost this in the last fight with the Abyssals. Even more wondrous was the figure of light now standing before him. He recognized her shape, the way she held herself, her bearing, everything was familiar, even the smell of lilacs that he always remembered in his dreams when he thought of her.

“Stand up and face him, my son! He is the cause for all of your pain. Strike him down now and be free of him!” The light held out a hand, which he gingerly took, and pulled him to his feet. Different tears now stained Jephraim’s cheeks as he looked into the shining face that even now smiled at him. Behind the light, the shadow was pushing itself to its feet. Jephraim pulled the figure of light behind him and stood ready to face off against his own personal demon.

Morticus groaned as he forced himself to rise. The demoness had struck him hard in the chest as he’d been trying to get Jephraim to snap out of it and stop his cries. Now he looked across at the thief in disbelief as he pulled the red-skinned she-devil behind him and readied himself in a defensive crouch.

“Thief! What are you doing with that devil! Get away from her before she hurts you again!” Morticus pulled his blade free of its scabbard and watched as Jephraim’s face hardened.

“You are the one who hurt her! I won’t let you do it again! It’s because of you that she died!” The thief screamed and raised his weapon, then he charged at the Captain, his weapon aimed for a killing blow. Morticus gasped and brought his own blade up to defend himself, while behind his friend the demoness smiled as her new puppet began raining blows down on him.

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Episode 9: Fresh Wounds and Old Scars

Morticus dodged to the side as Jephraim’s blade passed through the space where his head had just occupied. The thief, undeterred, turned and lunged at the Captain, who deftly parried another blow aimed for his gut.

“Stop! You damn fool!” Morticus hissed at his assailant. “It’s me! Morticus!”

Back in the shadows the demoness laughed a sultry sigh. “Kill him, my dear boy. He’s the reason for your suffering!” Her voice purred. Morticus struggled to keep an eye on the erratic blows from his comrade while still searching for his real target: the demon who

was responsible for the thief's actions. The effort proved too much as Jephraim's seax found its way past his defenses and landed a shallow cut across his arm. Morticus breathed sharply and backpedalled in order to increase the distance between them.

"Jephraim! Stop this!" Morticus cried out as the thief launched another assault on him. Ducking under a blow he brought his fist up to connect to the possessed thief's jaw, catapulting him backwards to land on the floor in a heap. Jephraim struggled to sit up, but as he pulled his head forward his eyes rolled back and he collapsed back onto the floor groaning in pain. Morticus grimaced as he remembered the fallen man's injuries from his previous fall. He pushed his worries to the side and instead cast his eyes about to try and find the source of the foul enchantment.

"Your man might not take another blow like that, you know." The sultry voice whispered from the darkness, causing Morticus to spin and face the opposite direction. He couldn't see anything, but somehow the shadows seemed deeper directly in front of him, almost tangible like a mist. He swung his sword and it cut through the dark like a fan through smoke, causing swirls of blackness to coalesce and flee before him. The demoness laughed, it was a lilting noise that caused strange stirrings within Morticus's gut, as if something were dancing inside his stomach.

"Clever man!" The laughter babbled all around him, threatening to overwhelm him. "You almost got me there, but you weren't quite fast enough. Let's try something different here with you… It seems that you share similar unresolved issues towards your father that your fallen friend has felt."

The laughter rose, gibbering in his ear like a maddened squirrel. The swirling darkness coalesced around him, becoming more solid until he felt hands gripping at him, trying to pull him closer somehow. He spun with his blade outstretched, blindly hoping to find purchase as the smoke continued to swirl about him. Suddenly a strong hand grabbed his wrist and stopped his motion dead. Morticus found himself staring into a pair of painfully familiar eyes.

"Hello son." A voice that ached with painful regrets called out from the darkness. Morticus tried to recoil from the visage now placed

before him, but the strong grip on his wrist prevented him.

“This is a trick!” Morticus’s voice betrayed him, however, catching in his throat when he needed it to carry his conviction. “You are not him! Foul demon!” He struggled to free his hand but the iron grip on his wrist would not yield.

“Am I not? You saw me the other night. You know that I am here. Is it really so hard to believe that I would seek you out once I knew you had come?” The voice was reassuringly soft, the eyes held the same terrible melancholy that Morticus remembered, the eyes of a man who had watched his world shatter time and time again, yet they still retained their kindness. Morticus stopped struggling, the arguments made sense, but how could he be sure?

“Prove it.” He said. “When I was seven I fell out of a tree and broke my arm. You carried me to the physician and the only way you could get me to stop crying was to repeat a promise to me over and over again until the bone was set and the arm secured. What was that promise?” His father’s face fell somewhat and he smiled sadly at him.

“You know how this enchantment works, my son, I taught you how to recognize when you’re being beguiled by it. The vision works within your own memories, much like a dream, you give the illusion the words to speak and the demon controlling the spell twists it to their own ends. Unless you’re prepared with a conditioned memory like this one.” His father released Morticus’s sword hand and raised his own fingers up brush the side of his son’s face. “And I promised you that the pain would end, that suffering is never eternal in nature, no matter how bleak it may seem.”

“I know. I’m sorry Father.” Once again Morticus’s voice caught in his throat but his hand did not hesitate. Now freed from the iron grip he quickly reversed his hold on his sword and rammed the blade up and into his father’s chest. His vision blurred as the point tore through his father’s body and he blinked back hot tears that burned down his cheeks and caused him to grind his teeth together.

There was a sharp gasp and the vision fell away, the room was once

again as it should be. Shadows returned to their normal lengths and Morticus's father's face dissolved to reveal the shocked features of the demoness still staring into his eyes as she fell slowly to the ground. Morticus allowed her own weight to pull her corpse off of his blade. Once she was laid out on the ground he took his blade and with a few precise strokes cut her head from her body, just to be sure.

Morticus scrubbed the tears from his face before walking over to look down at the unconscious form of Jephraim still lying on the floor. Kneeling down he reached over and gently eased the thief's head up with the palm of his hand. Jephraim stirred, groaning in pain as he did so and his eyes flickered open.

"Do you know who I am?" Morticus growled, his hand gripping his sword tightly in preparation for Jephraim's response.

"Yes, I know who you are." Jephraim's voice was small, his eyes were red and it was apparent that he was struggling to keep his emotions in check. Morticus relaxed his grip and sheathed his blade.

"I was afraid I'd have to kill you. That damn witch had you trapped up to your neck in her vision. What all did you see?" Morticus grunted as he helped the thief to his feet where he swayed unsteadily while the Captain held his arm. Jephraim remained silent and didn't answer Morticus's question. After a few moments of silence, the Captain once again spoke.

"I think they may be holding Rigo somewhere close by. The building isn't very big and I think that they would want to keep him close in order to use him as a bargaining tool. I think we should check the adjacent rooms and see if he isn't being held there." Jephraim nodded numbly at this but still refused to respond beyond that.

Morticus practically dragged the thief down the hall and laid him down propped up against the shadowed alcove he found there so that he might remain out of sight. As he stepped away from Jephraim the Captain heard him whisper something under his breath.

“What was that?” Morticus bent back to bring his ear closer to Jephraim’s mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” the thief whispered. Morticus pulled back and saw wet streams of tears falling down his friend’s cheek. The Captain sighed and patted his shoulder.

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry about, thief. The things you saw were powerful memories. It seems like whoever you were protecting that she was someone lovely.”

“She was my mother.” Morticus nodded at this.

“I figured as much, either that or a lover from your younger days. Nothing else could inspire that strong of a reaction but the love of a good woman to an undeserving man.”

“He killed her!” Jephraim’s voice cracked and he stared forlornly down the dark hallway.

“It isn’t fair, is it? How the good ones keep getting taken when those undeserving wretches like us keep living on, isn’t it? Was it your father who did it?” Morticus watched as his companion simply nodded in affirmation. “I thought so. That makes more sense as to why you volunteered to come with me.” Morticus sighed.

“There’s no redemption down here for you though, and I think you know that.” Morticus brought his face around to stare into Jephraim’s tear-stained face. Jephraim closed his eyes tightly and leaned his head back against the cold stone.

“It was my fault, though. The fire, the murder, everything came back to me being unwilling to bide my time. We could have run away. She might’ve lived. But I made her choose, and in choosing it cost her her life…” Jephraim’s voice was dispassionate and calm despite the still running stream down his cheeks.

“Do you really think that she would’ve left your father?” Morticus’s voice was soft, a kind tone that seemed at odds with his normal gruffness. “Your mother seems the type that would give all of

herself to the one she chose to give it to, and she seemed drawn to give it to those who little deserved it. She was a saint, and saints seem bent on suffering for the sins of others. She wouldn't have left your da unless she thought he was beyond saving, and by your reaction in that room I'd say it would've taken a lot more than you could've shown her to get her to leave." Morticus stood, his boots scraping across the bare stone.

"Your father's blood may be on your hands, but I also carry the same burden and for far more painful a price. Your father died to his own selfishness. He pushed a kid too far and wound up a corpse. While I don't know that he deserved to die or not, he certainly didn't seem a man who was going to contribute much to the world and therefore you've already surpassed him in what you've been willing to give for others." Morticus turned and walked towards the nearest cell.

"For what it's worth, I think your mother would be proud of you as you are now, in these moments." He called over his shoulder.

Grabbing the edge of the barred window on the cell door, Morticus lifted himself up to peer in. He saw a huddled figure lying in the far end of the small room beyond.

"Rigo!" He called out. The figure stirred and pulled itself up laboriously to lean on its elbow. In the dimly lit cell it was difficult to tell, but Morticus felt a familiar feeling in his gut. He jumped down and propped his sword into the gap between the door and the frame it stood within to try and lever the lock out of place.

"Hold on Rigo!," he called out, "we'll get this door open and then we'll get you out of here. Wilford and Berns are waiting back at the docks for us." Morticus pushed against the door a few times, but the aged oaken portal refused to budge, and the rusted lock refused to yield to the pressure. Morticus felt the despair welling up inside of him and he tried to push harder but the door remained in the same position, unwilling to move. A hand on his shoulder caused the Captain to turn. Jephraim stood there with something in his hand.

"If you keep that up, all you'll do is break your blade, and then we'll be in worse shape than we already are." Jephraim's voice was

hollow, but he gently pulled the Captain to the side and knelt down before the keyhole. Inserting the strange device he held in his hand the thief twisted a few times, grunting with effort and concentration. Suddenly there came a loud click followed by a sharp screeching noise as the lock popped open and the door swung wide. Morticus gave a short bark of triumph and charged into the room where he helped the struggling Rigo to his feet. Jephraim stepped unsteadily into the cell behind them. Grabbing Rigo's other arm, both he and the Captain supported Rigo from either side and began to move into the hall.

As they came into the shadowed hall they were stopped by the appearance of a dark figure barring their way. Morticus shifted Rigo's weight onto Jephraim's unsteady shoulders and stepped forward, drawing his sword.

"Out of our way Hellspawn! Or I'll cut our way through!" Morticus growled. The figure refused to move aside, instead it stepped closer and a shaft of moonlight from one of the high windows penetrated the gloom to land on the creature's face. Morticus's eyes narrowed and his grip tightened on the hilt of his sword as the demon spoke. For the second time that night Morticus heard a familiar voice calling forth a familiar greeting.

"Hello, my son."

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Episode 10: The Devil's Bargain

"Yes, it's really me." The voice was familiar, it sounded like it was true. The figure stepped forward and the moonbeam on his face shifted to focus on the eyes. They eyes were familiar, too, they seemed to be telling the truth as well. Morticus shifted his weight into a more defensive stance and stared at the demon before him.

"Prove it!" Morticus called out. "When I was seven…" He began.

"You fell out of a tree and broke your arm," the demon wearing his father's face cut across Morticus's question. "Yes, and I held you tight all the way to the physician. The only way I could get you to

stop crying was to promise you that the pain would eventually end." The demon smiled and his eyes crinkled at the edges just like Morticus remembered them. "I told you, it is me, and I am not lying."

"I believe you." Morticus's voice betrayed the sinking sensation he felt in his stomach, the sensation of falling echoing in his ears. The demon took another step towards him and the Captain snapped his blade up to point the tip directly at the creature's sternum. "I believe that you are not lying, that you think you are my father, but I assure you that you are not him, not anymore, if you ever really were."

"I do not understand." The demon's eyes were puzzled by this response.

"If you were my father, then you would never have allowed these demons to do what they have done to you. You are a fabrication made out of the stuff of twisted memory. You are a clone, a doppelganger, a mimic of the cruelest type." Morticus's eyes did not waiver as they bore into his father's familiar features.

"I assure you that I am not, my son."

"I am sure that you will, but you are mistaken, and do not call me your son again or I will finish this macabre parody right now." Morticus watched as genuine hurt seemed to flicker through those haunting eyes staring back at him. Whatever the demons had done to create this creature, they had created an extremely convincing disguise for it to wear.

"Morticus, it's me! It's Gregor, and I am your father, I swear it!" The demon held out a hand imploringly.

"Then why are you here with these abominations, *Father!"* Morticus's voice surprised even himself with its vehemence. "My father died long ago, he sacrificed himself to save me."

"Is that what you think happened?"

"I saw it happen! My father was consumed right before my eyes!"

His father's face fell at this declaration, his eyes falling to stare at the floor and his hands hung loosely at his sides.

"I was not consumed. But I was taken away from you. Ripped away into another world, into the aether that exists between the worlds. I'm sorry that I had to leave you, my boy."

"I told you not to call me that! You are a vile creation of the Abyss! You are *not* my father!" Morticus moved forward with his sword raised. The creature threw up its hands defensively and stepped back so that the entirety of its figure was encased in shadow.

"As you wish. I will not call you that, but you must believe me when I say who I say that I am, and I am Gregor Golden Hand, founder of the Order of Maurice, the warrior that quenched the Bloody Flame. I am he that fights against the dark. It is me, Morticus, whether you wish to accept it or not, I am who I say that I am."

"Why should I believe you?" Morticus paused with his blade outstretched, ready to strike.

"Why shouldn't you?"

"I saw my father die, I saw his body, I saw his chest pierced with the sword of his friend. My father is dead, so you cannot be him."

"And you think that precludes me from being here? I am a plane-touched being, Morticus, as are you. When beings have travelled between worlds as we have, different rules apply to our existence. Especially after we die."

"Captain! It's Rigo, he's fainted." Jephraim's voice cut through the terse darkness and pulled Morticus back into the reality of their present situation. Glancing behind him, Morticus backed slowly towards his two companions.

"How is he?" The Captain growled.

"He needs help, he's pretty badly hurt. I don't think he'll make it much longer." Jephraim shifted the weight of the unconscious Rigo

still hanging off of his shoulders. “You need to end this so that we can get him back and hopefully find a way back to the Brotherhood stronghold. He’s not going to make it otherwise.” Morticus sighed and raised his blade once more to point at the impostor standing before him.

“We need to leave, now.” His voice was rough and he glared menacingly as he spoke. “Either stand aside and let us pass or I will make you move.” The figure didn’t budge, but merely stood there and continued to stare from the shadows for a few more moments.

“I cannot allow you to leave, Morticus, you’re too important to allow you to slip away that easily.” The demon spoke slowly.

“So be it! Then die!” Morticus snarled and leaped forward swinging his sword in a heavy overhead arc. It was a blow meant to take the demon’s head from his shoulders, but in a sudden blurred movement something whirred in front of his face and Morticus’s blade stopped midair. In a shocked moment of realization, Morticus saw that the monster had caught his blade with his bare hands and now stood holding the sword edge in a clenched fist. With a sharp twist the demon shattered the blade and sent Morticus sprawling backwards to land on his back several feet away. After a few dazed seconds passed, Morticus pushed himself to his knees.

“Give me a weapon, thief!” He barked at Jephraim without turning. Extending his hand backwards he felt the cold leather handle of Jephraim’s seax pressed into his outstretched palm. Rising to his feet Morticus charged forward with the short blade raised, but before he could strike the demon raised its hand and barked out a short command.

“STOP!” He yelled, and the sound was so sudden and intense that it caused Morticus to falter in his steps and slow his charge before coming to a halt just outside of arm’s reach of the devil. The creature who wore his father’s face stepped forward, once more becoming illuminated by the shaft of moonlight from the cracked window.

“I cannot allow you to leave, my son.” The demon spoke and his eyes glittered imploringly at the Captain. “But, as a gesture of

goodwill I can allow your companions safe voyage from here, if you agree to stay and at least hear what I have to say, and see what I have to show you."

"Why would you allow that?" Morticus stepped back in order to increase the distance between him and the abomination before him.

"Because their lives are inconsequential at this point, letting them leave is only postponing the end of their existence, it will come soon enough for them and there is nothing that they can do at this point to stop it." The demon waved his hand and there was the sound of rushing wind that carried throughout the ruinous hallways of the decrepit building. "It is done, my soldiers will not touch them as they depart, you have my word." Morticus stared at the creature for a few moments, his eyebrows raised in dubious scrutiny.

"Captain?" Jephraim's voice cut through the sudden stillness.

"Go. We'll have to trust that his word is good." Morticus's gaze never left the demon before him.

"But what about you?"

"I said go!" Morticus barked. "Don't worry about me. If I go with you, then we all die. This way, at least, you will make it out of here. That's an order thief!"

"But…"

"I said GO!" Morticus's voice reverberated off the cracked walls and caused Jephraim to shrink back. After a moment of stunned silence the thief rose shakily and pulled Rigo to his feet. The wounded warrior groaned and struggled to stay upright but somehow managed to shuffle alongside his support as the two staggered their way through the shadowed hallway.

Once they were out of sight, the demon spoke.

"That was the wise choice. Now, come with me, I have something to show you." With that he turned and began walking away.

“And what is that?” Morticus spoke without moving.

“Your future.” The demon did not slow and eventually Morticus was forced to follow, burning questions refusing to allow him to stay his feet. Together the two wound their way deeper into the corridors of the crumbling building until Morticus saw a light ahead.

“What is that?” He questioned. His guide did not respond and the pair continued moving towards it. As they drew closer Morticus realized that it was a door whose outline was completely illuminated by a fierce red light shining from behind it.

“Open the door and you will see your destiny.” The creature spoke and motioned towards the glowing portal. Morticus hesitated for a moment and then, realizing there was no other choice at this point, strode forward and threw open the door. He gasped as the light swept over him and caused him to cover his eyes to avoid being blinded by the sudden illumination.

When his eyes adjusted his knees grew weak, causing him to slump to the floor at the sight that greeted him.

“Welcome home, son.” His father placed a clawed hand on his shoulder and gripped tightly in a silent embrace. Morticus couldn’t respond, he had no breath to do so. Instead, he wept.

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Episode 11: The Price of Redemption

The rain had stopped and red sunlight streamed through the broken, gray clouds overhead. Jephraim struggled under the weight of Rigo’s half-conscious form still slumped against his side. Breathing heavily, he rounded the final bend and saw the docks ahead of him, causing him to lengthen his stride as a renewed sense of vigor washed through his tired limbs and helped calm the spinning inside his skull brought on from his concussion suffered when he fell and was captured by the demons.

As he drew closer his blurred vision registered that a small boat was moored at the dock’s edge and a stranger was standing next to

Wilford. They were involved in an intense conversation which allowed Jephraim to get close to them before they noticed him and his burdensome companion. Wilford's eyes opened wide as he saw them approach and he quickly ran to assist the thief with his charge.

"Whar' be tha Cap'n?" Wilford asked as he came alongside the pair and threw Rigo's arm over his shoulders.

"He stayed behind. Had some things to talk about with his father." Jephraim panted. Wilford shook his head and gathered Rigo's weight onto his shoulders, relieving the thief from his load. Jephraim stumbled as his previously ignored exhaustion spread through his weary limbs.

"Who are you?" An imperious voice demanded from out of Jephraim's peripherals. Tilting his head towards the sound of the voice his eyes rested on a man wearing a large set of heavy plate, a blue cloak settling around his shoulders and brushing across the ashen ground. Blond hair whipped wistfully around a fairly young face and blue eyes stared out from beneath strands of yellow hair. A symbol of a dove in flight was embroidered on the blue cowl he wore just above his right breast.

"I am Jephraim, ward of the Order of Maurice." Jephraim's voice was heavy and his eyes closed involuntarily as he spoke, causing him to sway slightly as sleep threatened to overwhelm him.

"Well, Jephraim, it seems as though you've been through quite the ordeal. Your companion Wilford explained everything to me while we waited for your return. It's a shame about this outpost, but we will send another force to reclaim it, as this has been a most lucrative and essential foothold here." The man shifted his gaze around the still smoldering remnants of buildings that continued to crackle and burn as the light began to die away towards evening. "Gather yourself and get on the ship, we will be leaving shortly." Jephraim's eyes shot open at this statement.

"Wait! No! What about the Captain?" He asked.

"What about him? You barely made it back here alive. I assumed

that he had died, otherwise why would you have left him?"

"It's… complicated…" Jephraim shook his head "Look, let me go back and look for him, if I'm not back by nightfall you can leave without us, I know that he's not dead, but he is in danger and he needs help." The blond man stared at him for a moment, then nodded.

"That's less than an hour, man. What you are asking for is suicide."

"Please, sir…" Jephraim winced at the sound of his voice; he had never enjoyed begging.

"You misunderstand me, I do not plan on stopping you. You are free to try. My men are still scouring the ruins of the outpost and it will take longer than an hour to finish. You have until we are done, and once that is over and we are all aboard the ship, I set sail with or without you." The man turned, his cloak billowing out behind him and began to walk away.

"Thank you sir!" Jephraim straightened his shoulders and stared after the retreating form, before calling out, "Erm… forgive me… but I never got your name." The man stopped and turned around to face Jephraim again.

"I am Gelder Rahdstein, Parochus of the Order of Grace within the Brotherhood. Do not thank me, yet. Wait until you have returned with your captain first."

Jephraim nodded curtly and turned back towards the growing shadows of the Star-Struck City.

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Morticus stared at the blinding light of a thousand forge fires. Before him lay an open door and beyond that, strewn out in a fiery constellation of madness, lay a cavern far bigger than should have been able to sit beneath the rotting city above. Inside this huge cavern lay great rivers of fire that lit everything with blazing beams of orange light and red shadow which showed dozens of writhing figures bending and twisting in some macabre dance.

Looking closer, Morticus could not begin to count all of the figures that even now turned as one being to stare up at the door through which he stared and a blood-curdling howl tore itself from each of their cursed throats, blending together to form a shriek which threatened to shred his very sanity as it bellowed forth and slammed into him with its primal force. Behind him, the twisted parody of his father smiled slowly.

“Now you see the futility of allowing your friends to escape. Even if they make it off the island and back to the relative safety of their own strongholds, there is nothing that will prevent their deaths once this mighty host marches forth upon the surface world.” The demon laughed.

“How is this possible?” Morticus stammered.

“This door is magically linked to the depths of the Abyss far to the north. There are several more spread throughout the world of Mantica in preparation of a coming storm. The tides of evil are waxing strong and the time is becoming ripe for the blood of man, elf, and dwarf to bathe this world in an unholy baptism!” The demon cackled in unrestrained glee. “Each of these doors is linked to its commander, each one just as powerful as I am or moreso, and these commanders will lead their troops forward to begin the carnage very soon. Preparations are nearly complete and there is no way to stop it, my son! You can only join with it and discover your destiny by my side!”

Morticus’s mouth was dry, his lips were parched. He couldn’t find the breath to respond to this revelation. If he were a more prayerful being he might have tried to call upon some higher power at this moment, and indeed his hands came together to touch in just such a gesture as if guided by some dormant instinct within him. The surprisingly cool touch of his golden gauntlet against his other bare hand jarred him out of his terrified reverie and he looked down at it. His eyes narrowed as he stared at it carefully.

“Before you were born, our patron, Maurice, uttered a prophecy about you to your mother.” His father’s twisted voice sloughed over Morticus’s ears and he shuddered involuntarily. “He said that you

would be destined to help shape the future of Mantica, that you would become a great figure in the history of this world, but he did provide one caveat to that statement. He said that he could not see if you would be a force for good or evil, only that you would be a great and powerful shaper of the coming days. I think I see now how it will turn out now. You have a grave decision before you my son." The demon laid a hand on Morticus's shoulder and pulled him to his feet, forcing him to turn and stare into the its fiery eyes.

"What decision is that?" Morticus's voice was not terrified, no fear radiated from his eyes, but rather a calm melancholy had settled about his shoulders like heavy rain clouds in late winter when the snows refuse to give way to the chilling winds of early spring.

"You are plane-touched by one of the darkest, bloodiest deities to ever focus on the mortal realms. He was part of your inception, he cursed your birth while you were still in your mother's womb and implanted seeds of his own divinity there before your mother even knew that you existed. You were carried through blood and fire and your birth was heralded with death. You are a creature who has been crafted by the fates to give birth to unholy bloodshed here in this world. That is what drove you to commit those bloodthirsty acts as a child. It is why you heard whispers urging you to ever greater feats of violence. You were born a child of blood, with a bloody god's mark upon you. You were born to lead the legions that now stand arrayed in the cavern below us. You need only choose to join me in order to reach up and grasp your birthright!"

"What must I do, Father?" The use of that paternal title caused the demon to start, and slowly a grin spread across his face and for a moment something awoke from behind the fiery pupils that bore into Morticus's skull. Something soft, even tender perhaps. It was there for a moment only before the demon blinked and then it was gone, but the moment filled Morticus with a dread revelation.

"I *am* your father." The demon spoke. "I am glad you have accepted that."

"You are what is left of him, yes. Part of me hopes that there is more hiding within your twisted shell." Morticus did not struggle against the demon's hold on him as he was lifted off the ground by

its powerful claws.

“Do not wish such a fate on me, boy.” The creature’s voice changed, growing deeper with an intense heat that dwarfed even the fires from the cavern beyond the portal. “The things I am capable of now would be handicapped were I still hindered by your pitiful morals. I realize now the folly of living to protect others. Violence is power. I no longer need to ask permission or feel guilt when I serve myself to what I want. That is what filled my days as a mortal. Guilt for not being able to save my home. Guilt for letting my soldiers die. Guilt for your mother and our love. That is what serving others will bring you, son, nothing but days that are eaten away by the constant gnawing of guilt for the good which you could not do. Guilt for not being strong enough. Long nights spent agonizing and replaying the deaths of your men again and again in your mind. Pain as you see your beloved close her eyes for the last time while the mewling babe who killed her lays at your feet in a pool of her blood. All the while knowing that it is your fault that she is dead. Knowing that it is your lack of restraint that killed her, your sense of duty kept you from enjoying your last days with her!” The demon snarled and threw Morticus to the ground. The Captain rolled and scrambled to get some distance between him and his father, but the creature did not move. It stood staring at the floor, and when it spoke again, its voice was in a whisper that was barely audible.

“Do you know that even now, when I am up on the surface and the world is still and cool, I can still see her face?” The demon lifted its gaze to stare at Morticus, and his breathing stilled within his chest, and every word that the demon spoke after that raised in pitch and fervor until it was almost shouting. “That is why I am asking you to help me, my son! Come with me! Help erase all this pain from my self-righteous past! Take away the last vestiges of this guilt within me! Help me to become whole by joining me and helping me to wipe away all traces of this past by destroying the world to which it belongs! Please, son! Release me from my torment!” Morticus stared at his father for a moment before rising to his feet.

“What do you need me to do?” He whispered, his eyes never leaving the demon’s stare.

“Take off that accursed gauntlet. That is all that you need do. Then your unrestrained true nature will shine forth and you will no

longer be hindered in the path to your fate."

"What is so special about it?" Morticus did not seem surprised by the answer, more resigned than anything else.

"It was crafted by Maurice out of starmetal. It suppresses demonic energies and in your case it makes it so that your dark nature cannot express itself. It takes away who you are and forbids you your agency to act upon your own free will. It forces you to ignore your demonic heritage which was given to you before you were even born. It is such a strong enchantment that your demonic essence cannot even remove the cursed thing, only its wearer can remove it, and it must be done by the wearer's choosing." The demon moved closer to Morticus. "Once you take it off, your true nature will free itself and you will be able to join me at the head of our army."

Morticus stared at the golden glove which extended down his forearm. Intricate patterns and designs were etched into its surface. A large metal clasp sat in the middle of the bracer. Reaching up, he slowly began to twist it open.

"Captain, NO!" A voice echoed through the hallway. Morticus turned to see Jephraim standing behind him, his face drawn and his eyes open wide with an imploring look.

"Foolish human! You must wish to die after all!" The demon snarled and leaped towards the thief, who recoiled and fell to the ground. The demon stopped above him with its claws held overhead, a savage growl upon its lips. Jephraim raised his hands in a futile gesture to protect himself from the coming inevitability.

"Father, stop!" Morticus placed a bare hand on his father's shoulder. Red lines crisscrossed the newly exposed flesh. Turning its head, the demon saw the open golden gauntlet held in Morticus's other hand. "It is done, there is no need to kill the human. Let him go, he will die soon enough." The demon turned its face back to stare down at Jephraim.

"You have an extremely large amount of luck, human. One of these days it's going to run out. But not today, it seems. Flee, mortal!" In

a sudden burst of speed, the demon turned and caught Morticus's wrist which held the golden gauntlet. The Captain cried out in pain as it squeezed his wrist until the artefact fell from his nerveless fingers.

"You didn't think I would be expecting that, did you?" It hissed as it squeezed. The demon backhanded the Captain and he flew backwards to strike the wall behind him. "I know that it will take some time for your true self to regain power, and until it does I will be watching you very closely. The look on your face was perfect! You thought you could sacrifice yourself to save your poor, wretched father!?" The demon reared its head and let loose an awful laugh. Then he turned again and lashed out with a clawed hand to rake across Jephraim's exposed back as he bent over the fallen gauntlet. The thief cried out in pain and fell forward onto the ground.

"You don't know when to quit, do you?" The monster growled as its mouth curled into an evil smile. "It seems as though your luck has finally run out, then. You should have just run away, it would have prolonged your pitiful life for at least a day or two longer." It raised its clawed hand once more and leaned in for a killing strike. Just before the strike could fall, however, the creature reared up and bellowed in pain.

Behind it stood Morticus holding Jephraim's seax which was buried to the hilt in the demon's back. The creature screamed and whirled, once again throwing Morticus back into the wall behind him, where he slid to the ground. The beast ripped the small weapon from its back and raged at the slumped form of its son.

"It will take more than that, boy! Just for that I will make you watch as I disembowel your friend before your eyes! He will scream for mercy before the end, and you will have his sweet cries for help to accompany your descent into oblivion!" The creature once again turned back to face the fallen thief, but Jephraim had disappeared! The monster spun about, trying to locate the thief, but he was nowhere to be found. The demon raised its fists into the air and howled in frustration and as it did so it felt something cold and metallic slide over its forearm and a small click as a clasp latched in place.

Jephraim dodged away from the beast as it snarled in pain and anger and lunged at him, but its movements seemed slow, drunken even as it staggered forward. The sound of sizzling meat filled the air accompanied by sluggish cries of pain as the demon stumbled and fell forward onto its knees. A look of absolute hatred stabbed out of its eyes at the thief before a rumbling moan tore itself from its chest and it toppled forward onto the ground to lie still.

Jephraim sat for a moment, his heart pounding in his ears as he stared at the prone form of the demon. Before his eyes something incredible seemed to happen. The creature's body seemed to shrink and the bony protrusions and horns slowly began to pull back into its form. It's flesh took on a paler hue and its claws shrank to more human proportions. Magically the gauntlet shrank with the creature's form and stayed firmly latched to its arm, somehow it had even wrapped itself around the creature's hand so that it looked as though the demon had pulled the gauntlet on itself.

"Thank you, thief." Morticus's gruff voice rasped across the rapidly cooling hallway. Jephraim shivered at the sudden cold.

"Sleight of hand was always my best talent." Jephraim attempted to laugh, but it came out hollow and mirthless. "What happens now?" He asked, grimacing as he felt the claw marks on his back and fire spread out from the open wounds.

"Now, you need to take care of him for me." Morticus stared at the dwindling form of his father on the ground. "Make sure he's taken back to the Order's fortress at the edge of the Abyss, treat his wounds, make sure he stays alive." The Captain blinked and shook his head. He muttered something under his breath and shrugged his shoulders sharply. "Quickly, you must go, there isn't much time." Morticus walked towards the portal which was still open. Strange sounds could be heard from the cavern beyond, but they seemed to echo as if they were a long ways away.

"What about you?" Jephraim struggled to stand, groaning at the fire that spread out from his back and caused his breathing to come in ragged gasps.

"I'm no longer safe to be around." Morticus spoke without turning.

“Go back to the Order, tell them what you’ve seen here. Tell them that something is coming for which we are not prepared. Give them this.” Morticus pulled something from his belt and threw it to the thief, who caught it and looked it over. It was a simple signet of a mailed hand clasping a sword wreathed in fire.

“That’s my sign, it should give you some credibility. Warn them, Jephraim, tell them to call in all of our allies, whatever favors are owed us, promise whatever is needed to get as many troops as we can to the Edge. The light is dimming and soon fire and blood will be as common as the turning of the seasons. Take my father with you, his voice may carry some weight, but be careful with the story you tell of him. There are many that will not like that the original Grand Master has returned and will use any ploy they can to secure their own power, including murder I’m afraid.” Morticus shuddered and put a hand against the wall to steady himself. He turned slowly and glanced down at the fallen form of his father.

“I’m sorry I could not release you from your torment, Father. Maybe you will do so for me.”

“What about you?” Jephraim repeated his question. “Where will you go?”

“The portal is closing as my father’s power fades, but it’s still open. Do not expect to see me again, thief. Where I’m going few ever return. Thank you again for everything. Goodbye.” Before the thief could respond Morticus took the last remaining steps through the door and pulled it shut behind him. Immediately the horrible wailing from the opposite side stopped and a heavy cold consumed the hallway where Jephraim stood with the still dwindling form of Gregor Goldenhand lying on the floor. .

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Wilford saw the two figures shambling through the evening mist and ran towards them. As he approached he recognized the hunched form of the thief Jephraim, but there was something wrong with the other figure. When he was close enough to reach out to them he realized what it was and quickly drew one of his axes.

“Dinnae tell me tha’ be who Ah think it be?!” Wilford’s voice quavered as he spoke.

“It is, and I have promised to keep him safe.” Jephraim’s voice was weak and tired.

“An’ tha Cap’n?” Wilford asked. Jephraim simply shook his head and didn’t reply.

“Is the ship still here?” Jephraim asked instead.

“Aye, tho’ jus aboot ta leave ye. Bes’ hurry yon up thar an’ tell ‘im ye be here, afore he shooves off.” Wilford moved to take Morticus’s father from Jephraim, but the thief waved him away and stumbled towards the ship.
Once on board he quickly located the Parochus and the small skiff pushed off from the now abandoned wharf. Once they were in the water Gelder questioned Jephraim solemnly.

“I see you found what you were looking for?” He asked. Jephraim shook his head.

“No, I found something much worse. How quickly could the Brotherhood get us back to the Edge of the Abyss? To the Order of Maurice’s fortress?”

“That far? If it were an emergency, I imagine two or three weeks hard travel, depending on the weather. Why?” Gelder leaned over the slumped form of Morticus’s father and pulled the blanket off to reveal the slumbering face of the former demon.

“Because something terrible is coming, and we are going to need every possible minute we can spare.” Jephraim leaned back as the Parochus stared at him quizzically before shrugging and walking away to bellow orders to his men who were manning the ship as they sped through the expanding mists of the coming night. Despite all that had happened, Jephraim closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

-Here ends the first chapter of our Heroes’ Journey -

Pilgrimage

by Chris Davis

In the north there exists a place known as the Ankor Zharr, the dominion of fire, and it is considered to be a holy place. Ankor Zharr looms over the eastern-most point of the scar that is the Abyss. To gaze upon it is to gaze upon the very essence of what drives the dawi zharr.

The dominion of fire is so large that the it's westernmost point intersects with the easternmost point of the Abyss, while it's northern boundary meets with the frost of the frozen north. Ankor Zharr is a vast pit of fathomless depth; a fire juts from the pit, seen in all directions for miles around. The fire is constantly changing colors but always uniformly intense in its heat.

The walls of this pit are lined with chains of all shapes and makes; Chains of pure ice, chains of air that remain solid even when hit with the hardest hammer blow, chains of orange-green witch fire. All these chains lead from the inside wall to a singular nexus in the midst of the pit. At this nexus point, where all the chains intersect, is a platform made of steel, earth, and brass. Upon this dais of chains, steel, and earth, stands a fire shrouded in constant fog, a fog created from the constant cold to the north and the intense fire of Ankor Zharr.

For this is the oubliette of the bullgod.

Here is where his raging form stands chained, trapped. When the bullgod struck his deal to escape the dying oldworld, he was promised a place of salvation. Escape he did, but his freedom was to be a prison, for the daemons of the Abyss saw no need to let the bullgod roam free upon the plains of Mantica.

Upon the bullgod's entrance to this new realm his prison was shut tight around his form. He was left just close enough to the essence of the Abyss to survive, yet just close enough to the freezing cold of the far north for to keep his power in check. The bullgod, Hashut, needs fire, heat, and motion, to survive; thus the bullgod thrashes at his binds, struggling for freedom to escape his oubliette. Those who

come to Ankor Zharr come to see their god, struggling and trapped upon his dais of chains. Each dawi zharr is granted a different vision.

Some see the bullgod as a giant raging bull, cruelly chained, raging against his many binds. Some see a fire that burns so bright that it seems as a second sun; still it is shackled. Others see visions not yet shared or are driven mad by the mere presence of such power struggling so. Despite what they may see, many risk to gaze upon the face of their god, for the dawi zharr see this not just as a chance to see their god but also to bask in his power.

Such is the will of Hashut and his children of fire, that even bound as they are in this new world they strive to survive even at the cost of their very selves. So they journey to see their bound god, some upon a holy trek to pay piety and reverence, some just to behold a god chained. The only way to make the journey is to undertake a pilgrimage, a holy trek. The road to Ankor Zharr is a long trip from the fortified city-ziggurat known as Zharr Bin Azul, "The Fire of Steel".

When the dawi zharr arrived in the new world they were quick to begin work on the fortified city-ziggurat Zharr Bin Azul. As is their way they created a behemoth of stone, brass, and steel. They are surrounded by walls six feet thick, towering thirty feet tall, double reinforced. With iron wrought with brass cravings and runes of protection and sealing. To mortals these defenses would seem unneeded, for who would lay siege to a god, even a bound one?

To question this is to question the mindset of a dawi zharr, for to the dawi zharr they are under constant pressure from all lesser races. To build, to conquer, to enslave, and to fortify their holdings is of a second nature. So it was only natural that the dawi zharr would build a fortified city near such a holy mecca. But it is not in defense alone that the ziggurat Zharr Bin Azul stands, for it is the stronghold of all the dawi zharr who make the journey from the oldworld to Mantica.

Once one arrives to Zharr Bin Azul, one would find their self surrounded; bound daemons, armored dawi, and of course slaves. All of this is among a swirling market of goods, services, military

forces, and all other forms of commerce; everything one could need to trade, bargain, and of course sell, in the name of the dawi zharr. All exist to further the whims of the empire that is the dawi zharr. It is also the staging area all pious members come to before making onwards to Ankor Zharr.

The northern most exit of Zharr Bin Azul opens to a massive stone brick road flanked on both sides by massive obsidian walls. These walls are said to have appeared when the bullgod was pulled into Ankor Zharr. Where they come from is unknown to any; what is known is the dawi zharr knew where their god was by the mere presence of such massive walls.

The first dawi zharr to see them was a prophet who felt the presence far before he saw them. When the prophet finally saw the walls, he was stunned by their sheer size. They stand 12 feet wide and easily 80 feet high, blacker than night. It is said the nameless prophet was given a vision to build Zharr Bin Azul, but in homage to keep the walls lesser in nature to the walls of obsidian. The nameless prophet, upon seeing that his vision would be carried out, traveled down the path, never to be seen again.

For a time, any who traveled the path obsidian walls inside or out of them was never to be seen again. So for a while none traveled the path, and the assumption the bullgod was at the end of the Path of Sorrow, as it became known, was based upon faith alone. Once Zharr Bin Azul was finished, the dawi zharr set about understanding what befalls all who travel the Path of Sorrow. With the usage of many slaves, the true consequences of the Path were uncovered:

The Path of Sorrow is a test.

It is not just a test of mental endurance for its distance, but also one that taxes the body in such a way that flight is not possible and travel on foot is reduced to a slow walk. Some of the prophets even summarized that it was a walk of penance, that to go down the path is to do so at the bullgod's pace. Slowly struggling as he struggles, every step an effort. Whatever the reason for the slow pace, it was discovered and the revelation made travel down it possible. The pace is tiresome for the dawi zharr, and grueling for lesser races. Due to this pace and reduced speed, many have lost

their sanity in the effort to travel the walls' length.

Once one reaches the end of the Path of Sorrow, one is greeted by the vision that is Ankor Zharr; so massive as to reduce one's mind to nothingness just by comparison of scale. Those minds that survive the trek are made ready for seeing the bullgod in his struggles, but still this is not proof enough for many. This was discovered in the fate of the lost prophet, for in his visions and journey to the mecca of the bullgod, he was lost in that same vision. All who become lost in the vision end up in the pit that is Ankor Zharr. A lesson is taught in the pilgrimage to the bullgod's resting place.

Make ready thy mind.
Be as stout of mind as of body.
Be thee prepared or be lost for all time.

For the path and the journey to the bullgod are both a test, not just of faith but of body, mind, and soul. Those dawi zharr who fall short are seen to be unworthy. Such is the cruelty of the dawi zharr: survive, no matter the cost.

The Soulshard

by Ender Thompson

Part I - Flight to the Sea

Ten mounted men rode north at a steady canter through the rolling hills of the eastern Mammoth Steppe. Alongside them jogged two ogres – hulking red-skinned creatures with bestial faces and arms like oak trunks. Behind them trailed a dozen riderless horses, one with a body slung over its back, the bloody face hidden by long black hair. They were the last remnants of an ill-fated expedition to the twisted land of Tragar, and now they fled the whips and slave-hooks of the Abyssal Dwarfs. Zarak was three days behind them, though her dreadful denizens could not be more than a day off. If they could reach the frontier port of Skirnirak, they might escape to sea on any boats the refugees had left behind. The alternative did not bear thinking about.

As they crested the highest hill yet, the leader glanced back and signaled a halt. Grateful for the respite, the men half-tumbled from the saddles and held the reins of the exhausted horses while they sat on the yellow grass. One of the ogres snarled something unintelligible to its companion as it sprawled on the hillside. A couple of growls later, the other approached the leader, the top of whose head barely reached the ogre's nose, even mounted as he was.

“My brother and I cannot run much farther, south-man. He says to wait here, on this hill, to slow our enemies in their pursuit of you,” he rumbled.

Handal Merikos regarded the monstrous ogre doubtfully. “Both of you? I should not like to tell your tribe that I failed you all. Even the loss of your three brothers in Zarak they might forgive, for they know the duplicity of the Abyss. But they will never believe that their warriors were unable to finish a run!”

The ogre licked its fangs and grunted. “We have not fallen yet, manling! But founder we will if we run much farther, and your horses cannot carry us. Tell the Fanged Eagle only that we fell to a

foe greater than any Ogre and more treacherous than any weasel of a Goblin! And," he added, licking his fangs again, "perhaps do not tell them that we died running."

Handal bowed from his saddle. This was not the first time that exhausted survivors had elected to stay and attempt to delay the enemy – but two ogres might just buy them enough time to reach Skirnirak and safety.

"Do you want anything?" he asked the ogre.

"One horse, for us to eat tonight before the demons come tomorrow."

"I'll see to it."

The ogre gave a nod of its great head and turned away, thumping back down towards its "brother". The ogres of the plains referred to anyone of their tribe as their brother, and normally would not think twice to sacrifice thirty outsiders for one brother. And in cases like this, they were loath to leave a brother to face death alone. Handal admired the courage of the brutes, although he normally detested them. It was quite possible that the two of them, after resting for a day and eating a horse, would be able to do away with an entire regiment of Blacksouls. Handal had seen one particular ogre single-handedly slay a Basilean Ur-Elohi.

He ordered one of the men to give one of the riderless horses to the ogres. Then he looked back once more at the haze of smoke that darkened half the sky over Tragar. Far off he could just make out the glint of the afternoon sun on the armor of their pursuers as they crested a rise.

They rested for perhaps half of an hour, then changed horses and rode on, leaving the doomed ogres to wait on the hillside for their foes. As they reached the top of the next hill, Handal looked back and saw Rakatak standing, watching them leave. Then he descended the other side and the ogre was lost to sight.

Part II - Painful Farewells

It was dusk on the fifth day since they left Zarak when the riders arrived in Skirnirak. Only eight of them were left – Handal held the reins of the horse carrying the dead man, the only riderless horse among them now. The town was totally deserted, but had not yet fallen into disrepair. It was only a month since the inhabitants had fled, after all. They rode through the empty streets, past the dark inn and onto the abandoned harbor. The only boat in the docks was the one they had arrived in.

It took until dark for the flagging horses to drag the boat into the water. Once they had staggered out of the water, Handal's men slaughtered them and put the meat on board, working through the night rather than stay a moment longer in the empty town. The meat they stored in the small hold, and they filled three barrels of water from the town well. The dead man's body was carefully laid on the bed in the cabin. Just before dawn, they were ready to leave.

Handal was the last to step aboard. As the boat cast off from the dock, a shadow flew over the deck. Two of the men moaned and pointed skywards as the gargoyle – a lesser fiend commonly employed by the Abyssal Dwarfs – circled to attack. Handal stared at it in despair. It was in the form of a female human figure, but with blue-black skin, clawed hands and feet, and the head of a fiend. Its wing-membranes were dark red, contrasting with the skin in a terrifying way. It howled, and the howl was echoed a dozen or more times from the hills behind Skirnirak. Then it flapped higher, gaining altitude before folding its wings and plummeting towards them.

Handal dove aside as the demon crashed into the deck. Wood splintered and the boat lurched, sending him rolling across its width. Handal leaped to his feet as the gargoyle was joined by three more. They circled above the boat, laughing wickedly as the panicked steersman released the wheel and ran for cover.

Handal ran for the cabin where the dead man's body was lying. He burst through the hatch, leaving it swinging on its hinges, and flung open a chest near the bed to grab a bow and quiver of arrows.

A scream split the air from the rigging. Handal looked up. One of the frontiersmen who had been setting the sails when the first

gargoyle appeared was caught in the claws of two demons who were hoisting him skywards. Handal fumbled with the bowstring, caught the end of the bow and managed to string it. He snatched up an arrow, notched it to the string, and shot at one of the gargoyles tearing at the unfortunate fellow. The arrow hissed over the head of the wrong one. They turned their heads towards him and dropped the frontiersman's mangled form into the water. They hissed and screeched as he shouted defiantly at them and let another arrow fly in their general direction. This one came nowhere near either of them. The other gargoyles were now circling down towards the boat, emboldened by the blood spattering their talons. Handal gave up on the bow and flung it down on the deck. He caught sight of two of his men cowering under the bowsprit.

“Get out of there, you lily-livered lickspittles!” he shouted, incensed. “Draw your swords and defend the helm!”

They looked at him with terrified faces, but did what they were told. Handal joined them as they stood around Narik, the steersman. They were not a moment too soon.

A gargoyle flew down to the deck and advanced menacingly towards the wheel and the three men defending it. At the same time one of those circling overhead dove at Narik. Handal shouted and swung his sword but the blow glanced off its rock-hard flesh. It veered off and looped around for another attempt while a third descended to balance on the rail.

Meanwhile the three men still on the bottom deck had engaged the other gargoyle, surrounding it and hacking at its wings to keep it from taking off. As Handal watched, one of them darted in and thrust his sword with all his might into the monster's gaping mouth. It slumped, vomiting a foul yellow stuff that charred the deck where it spilled.

The one on the rail pulled a fearful face and sprang. One of the men with Handal shouted and cut at its face. The thing caught his sword in one hand and tore the man's throat out with the other before Handal stabbed it through the eye, killing it instantly. The gargoyle that Handal had failed to injure swooped at the men on the lower deck and tried to grab one in passing, but the agile frontiersman

stepped out of the fiend's reach and slashed its wing membrane as it shot past. Unable to flap, the thing tumbled into the harbor with a resounding splash. At first Handal thought its wings were dragging it to the bottom, but the salt water was actually dissolving the gargoyle's unnatural flesh. It screamed twice before it gave up the struggle and sank below the surface.

The remaining gargoyle circled the ship, eyeing the sharp swords below. The rapid demise of its brethren appeared to have put it off attacking for the time being, but it was loath to return to its hellish masters empty-handed. Finally it gave a suspiciously human-sounding cackle and perched on the mast where it grinned evilly at the dismayed men on the deck. It wrapped its talons around the spar and appeared to freeze in place, looking for all the world like an extremely large and ugly masthead.

Part III - A Strange Passenger

“Why is it just sitting there?” called Trovi. He was the youngest of the group, a lanky red-headed fellow barely twenty years old. The young man nervously switched sword hands, and back again.

“A better question would be how long does it plan to stay?” said Narik. “We can't exactly get it down, gargoyles have a nasty habit of reviving just when you within reach.”

Five frightened gazes turned to Handal. He glared up at the demon and tried to recall everything that the dwarven Warsmiths had told them about the creatures of the Wicked Ones. Everybody knew gargoyles could turn themselves to stone, but Gravis had not known whether they remained aware of their surroundings while petrified.

“Fortunately, the beast has not harmed the sails!” he said. “If it stays where it is, we can still reach Cur Darag and there the Stone Priests will have power over it. It is only two days sailing, and we can keep a watch on the mast. As long as it doesn't move we must continue our travel, but if it twitches so much as a wingtip we will have to do something.”

This was received with a fair bit of grumbling, but nobody seemed eager to attempt dislodge the demon from its post and Handal had

been dealing with monsters since before some of them had been born. Trovit was declared “demon-watcher” by unanimous decision – unanimous except for Trovit, of course – and the others began to relax a bit, although with many dark glances at the unwelcome addition to the boat's crew.

Handal looked around at his skeleton crew. Even if they had not been dead-dog tired from nearly six days of riding and fighting with little food and less sleep, they would still be a dirty, loutish bunch. Narik, the steersman, was the only one aboard besides Handal who knew how to navigate. He was short and stocky, with a misshapen lump of a nose and a scar running through his stringy black hair.

Trovit, the most junior member of the expedition, was a twitchy sort on his first adventure. He carried a nicked and rusted sword he claimed had been left him by his father. Rivio the Keretian was a towering figure of a dockworker-turned-adventurer. Mosa the Genezan was a small, ratlike man who carried more daggers than there were swords in the company. Lurac was a dark-skinned bruiser who had been with Handal longer than anyone still alive on the ship. Timmo had been a smiling, fast-talking thief whose luck had carried him through many a scrape, until the gargoyle's talons had ended his streak.

The thirteen-man company had been visiting the Free Dwarf hold of Cwl Gen when Gravis, their mage, was snatched by Abyssal Dwarf agents hidden among their honest kin. A furious chase through the Halpi mountains had ensued and just as the high peaks began to give way to rolling hills and tall grass they had caught the dark dwarves and slain them all with the help of five ogres who had been cut off from their hunting party. During the fight, however, an Abyssal sorcerer had joined the fight long enough to grab the weakened Gravis and teleport away with him. Although the ogres had been able to ascertain that Gravis had been taken to the citadel of Zarak, they had been forced to withdraw to Cur Darag, the northernmost Free Dwarf hold. The ogres, ever opportunistic, had decided to join the mercenaries for the chance to raid the treasure-houses of the Abyssal Dwarfs.

From Cur Darag they had sailed to the human outpost of Skirnirak and found it almost entirely deserted. The captain of the last boat to leave had told Handal that the Abyssal Lords were stirring, and that

they had been fighting off the Abyssal raiders nearly every night for two weeks. From him they had obtained horses for the men and food for the ogres, and they had ridden to Zarak where, to their surprise, they were welcomed by greasily-smiling Abyssal Dwarfs who had appeared quite willing to discuss the ransom of Gravis. Handal, with the help of the leader of the five ogres, had managed to obtain Gravis' release in return for the servitude of three ogre tribes (ogres never being too picky about who they fought for, so long as they fought).

Their reunion with Gravis would have been a joyful event had the Abyssals not slain the mage with a crossbow the moment he was out of their hands. Worse, Mosa had returned the favor by throwing one of his knives through the bowstring and into the eye of the murderer, thereby kicking off a night of battle in the streets of Zarak that had resulted in their mad flight to Skirnirak with Gravis' body.

They rolled Timmo's nearly-decapitated body over the gunwale as the boat passed the promontory of the desert island east of Skirnirak. Off in the distance, the Cape of Zarak was shrouded in fog, which struck Handal as odd considering the heat of the sun.

“Narik, take us well clear of the fog bank if you can. It doesn't look natural, and I know there was at least one Ironcaster in the troops that chased us to the coast. I don't know if they can control weather but we had better steer clear of the Cape anyhow.”

Narik nodded and set the boat on a course farther to the east, aiming to go the long way around the pair of islands that straddled the opening to the Sea of Bari. As they passed behind the larger and the fog was hidden from view, Handal heard a far-off braying sound, as if a thousand horns had blared at once.

On the lower deck, Trovit shivered. Narik took one hand off the helm to make a sign against evil, then looked askance at the gargoyle perched motionless on the mast.

“Handal, maybe he ain't movin', but I still get the feelin' we oughta get rid of that ugly-arse excuse for a chickenhawk before it gets rid of us, if you takes my meanin',” he muttered.

“Don't worry, Narik. Trovit's watching him. Even if it does move you can be damn sure he'll let us know.”

Narik grinned briefly at the recollection of Trovit's first encounter with a demon. The young man had been so shocked and terrified that he had yammered like an idiot until the thing left. It was the first cheerful expression Handal had seen in weeks.

“We'll be fine, Narik. You know the demon doesn't like salt water and here we are surrounded by it. I'm going to go sleep in the cabin, come wake me in a couple hours and I'll take the helm. Even I can steer us straight across the Sea of Bari.”

Finally daring to feel somewhat hopeful, he descended the ladder to the lower deck and crossed to the cabin to get some much-needed sleep.

Part IV - Dwarves and Demons

Three days later, slowed somewhat by a cross wind and the heavy demon – who remained immobile and unresponsive – making it impossible to adjust the sails, the boat sailed slowly into Darag Bay, which to all appearances was deserted. Even the rocky shores seemed empty except for a small boathouse at the farthest inlet. It was toward this wooden structure that Narik steered them.

Handal, much the better for some sleep and a pair of square meals, went to the prow of the boat and leaned out over the water. As the boat approached the shore he hallooed the boathouse a couple of times before a side door opened and a very short, very bearded fellow appeared, blinking a bit in the unaccustomed sunlight.

“Halloo the boatkeeper! Let us in, we have returned by a miracle!” Handal shouted across the water.

“Halloo yerself, mercenary, and pray tell what in the name of Golloch's Hold is that?” the dwarf yelled back, pointing in confusion at the gargoyle.

“A new golem for your Priest Kragni, what else? I told you we

would not return empty-handed, and we have collected a stone demon for Kragni and recovered the body of Gravis!"

By this time the boatkeeper dwarf had pulled the lever to open the doors, which up close were quite a bit larger than they had appeared across the bay. They swung silently inwards as the boat floated through and into a long tunnel lit only by torches in brackets on the walls.

"A golem, says you? Well in all my long years I never did see a golem that ugly, and I recall the one that my old great-grandda tried to make out of clay. 'Twas the most shapeless, malformed, *sticky* monster y'ever did see, and I recall the slop creature that invaded the kitchen in the hard winter..." the boatkeeper rambled as the doors swung shut behind the boat, cutting them off from the sun. He strolled along beside the hull on a narrow stone walkway jutting out from the wall. As he walked, the old dwarf – for he was over two centuries old – treated the weary sailors to accounts of every memory that crossed his mind, including the famous incident of Cousin Throgo's beard and Great-Aunt Magarr's armchair.

The boat moved along slowly, no longer moved by the wind but rather by a strong current in the passageway which stretched ahead a fair distance before suddenly widening out into a vast cavern filled with boats, ships, and floating docks with dwarves hard at work loading and unloading their barges. There were many other underground waterways leading out of the cavern, and brightly lit barges floated in and out laden with cargo.

As the boat entered the cavern, Handal heard a cracking sound behind him and a shriek from Trovit. He whirled around to see the gargoyle on the mast unfurling its wings and shedding chips of flint onto the deck around the mast. Before Handal could draw his sword, it had fully awakened and twisted to face him with glowing red eyes.

"I thank thee, sellsword," it hissed at him, nearly causing him to drop his sword in surprise. "The mage is mine!"

With a shriek of triumph it leapt from its perch and flapped low across the water towards the docks. Handal stared after it in shock.

He had never heard of gargoyles having voices, or glowing eyes, for that matter. As the demon swooped over the docks dwarfs shouted in surprise and blew warning horns until the underground harbor rang with the echoes, but the demon ignored them completely and flew straight as an arrow towards the wide passages leading to the dwarf city.

As the boat reached the docks, a young dwarf rushed toward them. On spotting Handal, he skidded to a stop and caught his breath before speaking.

“I am Bruli son of the Stone Priest Brogir, and I am to warn you that my father has no power over the demon that returned with you! A greater Lord of the Abyss is controlling it, and my father believes that it is looking for the familiar of the mage Gravis,” the dwarf said in a rush. He was very young for a dwarf, with barely a beard to speak of.

“But Gravis is dead,” Mosa said with a scowl. He had been the wizard's closest friend in Handal's company for several years. “His familiar must be as well.”

“The bird keeled over dead in its cage a week ago. But my father says the demon can possess the bird's body and through it control the mage's body, with all of Gravis' powers.” the dwarf recited. “It cannot possess Gravis' body directly because he had many wards against demons, but the mage did not foresee a demon entering the hold when he left his familiar in our care.”

“Has your father divined why the Abyssals are so interested in Gravis?” Handal asked.

“He says that Gravis' familiar revealed to him that Gravis once stole an artifact of tremendous power from the hall of the Ironcaster Ak-Shabarr, who has never stopped searching for it. The Ironcaster thinks Gravis still has the artifact and by controlling Gravis' body and powers he will be able to recover his artifact,” said Bruli.

Handal winced. Gravis had been notoriously obsessed with magical artifacts of all kinds. “Perhaps we should simply let the demon take its artifact?”

Bruli blanched. “Never, Handal. Ironcaster Ak-Shabarr dreams of conquering Cur Darag, and with his artifact returned to him he would surely be unstoppable. I have no idea how he failed to obtain it while Gravis was in his possession.”

“Then where is the familiar's body? Surely you didn't just throw it away like trash?” Handal asked.

“My father is guarding the canary's body, but the demon,” and here Bruli winced and clutched at his head, “has begun its attack. He can barely affect it at all with his mastery of stone: the Ironcaster's power is incredible. He asks you to guard the body of Gravis in case he fails and the Ironcaster takes control of the mage.”

“That we can do. If Gravis is turned against us, can we kill him?”

“Perhaps. It would be surer to destroy the artifact, as the Ironcaster would most probably desist without the chance of obtaining his prize.”

“What does the artifact look like, then?” Handal asked.

“My father does not know, but he says you would be unable to destroy it in any case.” Bruli said. Then he gave a sigh of relief and collapsed, unconscious. Handal looked at the supine dwarf in disbelief – he had never heard of a dwarf fainting! A pair of older dwarfs, who had come puffing up behind Bruli, picked him up off the floor.

“Stone Priest Brogir can speak through his son's mouth when he must, but it is very hard on the young one's brains, ye see,” one of them explained as they began to carry the snoring Bruli back towards the passages leading to the city.

“Hard on his brains?” a voice behind Handal said. “My my, this has been a day of headaches!”

As the mercenaries whirled around, a blast of hot air sent them tumbling across the docks. Floating a good foot off the dock, the tip of the bolt that had killed him still sticking out of his chest, Gravis'

dead eyes shone a dull red.

Part V - Avenging Blade

Lurac was the first to recover his balance as the dock bobbed in the water. He took a firm hold on his mace and charged at Gravis. The mage flicked a finger and a streak of blue lightning blasted the big man into a shower of ash. The others stumbled to their feet, staring in shock at the dead wizard.

Gravis raised a hand in a mocking salute, then swept it downwards. The floating wooden dock was shattered into a dozen pieces beneath their feet, spilling Lurac and Trovit into the water. Handal found himself sharing a section with Mosa, while Narik fell to his hands and knees on another. Gravis hovered over the water, with nothing except the Ironcaster's magic holding him aloft.

“Where is it?” he snarled, moving towards Handal. “It's mine, human! Tell me where it is!” Then he hissed in surprise and spun around, backhanding Mosa into the water with terrifying strength. Two of the Genezan's knives protruded from his back along with the feathers of the crossbow bolt. Handal took the opportunity to slash at Gravis' right shoulder. The dead flesh gave way easily and the arm splashed into the water. Ak-Shabarr screamed in true pain and recoiled higher into the air for a moment before recovering.

“Foolish man!” Gravis' face hissed. “I will ask you once more, and perhaps I will let you live if you answer me; where is the Soulshard?”

In response, Handal ran his sword through Gravis' chest. It grated on one of Mosa's daggers. Ak-Shabarr gasped, then shattered the blade with a swing of his remaining hand. Shards of iron flew, and Handal received a cut across the forehead from a piece of his own sword. He lost his balance and tumbled into the cold black water.

“You will not tell me!” the Ironcaster raged. “I will tear you apart, fool!” Gravis' battered corpse raised its arm and Handal rose out of the water, an invisible force grabbing him around the waist and hoisting him into the air. Then he fell back into the water as Ak-Shabarr's concentration was broken yet again, this time by Narik's

sword slicing into Gravis' right side. Gravis' body spun about, but with no arm on that side he was unable to cripple Narik the way he had Mosa. At the same time, Trovit shouted and flung a piece of the dock at the animated mage, having lost his weapon when the dock split. The broken plank hit Gravis right in the forehead, smashing his nose. The Ironcaster let out a howl of frustration and sent a blast of raw force outwards in all directions, knocking Trovit and Narik into the water again and setting those already in the water bobbing away from him. Rivio, the strongest swimmer of the bunch, dove underwater and came up directly underneath the floating corpse. The Keretian grabbed both of Gravis' ankles and hauled him into the water by brute force.

For a moment nothing could be made out through the splashes, but suddenly the water turned red and Rivio's lifeless form appeared, torn nearly in half. Handal clambered back onto a section of dock as Gravis rose out of the water.

“No more playing!” Ak-Shabarr roared, and his voice echoed off the cavern walls. Handal, Narik, Trovit, and Mosa were hoisted out of the water as Handal had been before. They hovered in a ring around Gravis, whose hand began to glow red-hot.

“Who shall go first?” the Ironcaster boomed. “Who shall tell me where the Soulshard is?”

Mosa, though one arm was clearly broken and he appeared to be having difficulty breathing, pulled a long knife from his belt and flung it at Gravis. It sank into the mage's arm-stump, the handle sticking out like an absurdly small replacement arm. All it did was infuriate Ak-Shabarr even more, however.

The Ironcaster turned on Mosa, extending Gravis' arm and causing all of Mosa's remaining knives to fly out from their sheaths and hiding places to circle him. Even Handal was surprised by how many there were.

“Turn my weapon against me, will you?” Ak-Shabarr hissed through Gravis' mouth. “See how you like it!” With a flick of his wrist the circle of blades closed. Mosa coughed bright red blood and sagged in the air. A sneer cracked Gravis' pallid face and he released Mosa,

who splashed into the water impaled on his own knives.

Ak-Shabarr began to turn towards Trovit, and the gargoyle swooped out of nowhere and slammed into Gravis. The spell broken, the three surviving mercenaries fell to the bloody water yet again. As they caught hold of the remains of the dock, Handal looked up and saw the gargoyle swiftly pounding Gravis' corpse into a shapeless, gory mass. The gargoyle swung its talons viciously as it destroyed Ak-Shabarr's vessel. As Handal watched, it grabbed the mangled body and tore it in half.

A horrible shriek echoed throughout the harbor as Ak-Shabarr's spirit fled, defeated, back to the Abyss and its proper body. The pieces of Gravis' body joined the mess in the water, and the gargoyle looped around the cavern before skimming the surface of the water to scoop up the dumbstruck mercenaries one by one and deposit them on the docks that were still intact. Then the demon landed a few docks away and sat back on its haunches.

“Are ye hurt?” a gravelly voice inquired. Handal looked up to see a white-bearded dwarf standing over him, extending a hand the size of a small shovel. Handal accepted it and was hauled to his feet. Nearly a hundred other dwarfs stood looking rather awestruck behind the old dwarf, whom Handal recognized as Stone Priest Borgir.

“Everyone's dead,” Handal stammered, exhaustion sweeping over him like a tidal wave.

“Ye have taken a beatin', that's for sure,” the dwarf agreed, before calling the other dwarfs to come and care for the dripping humans.

Part VI - The Soulshard

“I want to know why Gravis was captured,” Handal said. Narik nodded agreement.

The three surviving members of Handal's mercenary company stood in the center of Brogir's hall, while the Stone Priest himself sat in a comfortable armchair near a crackling fire. Trovit alone had escaped uninjured from the battle with Ak-Shabarr, while Handal

had an ugly line of stitches across his forehead and Narik had one arm in a sling. They had decided to stay in Cur Darag a while to recover and decide what to do next.

“Well, he stole something very important from Ironcaster Ak-Shabarr of Zarak,” Brogir said. He pulled a glowing piece of kindling from the fireplace and used it to light a pipe, which he puffed on several times before continuing.

“The wizard Gravis was much more powerful than I believe any of you suspected. He took up traveling with you only to stay one step ahead of the Abyssal Dwarfs. Even then, he was not able to evade them forever.

“The Soulshard was forged nearly a thousand years ago, during the God War. It was Garkan the Black's first experiment in the work that led him to create the orcs. He captured the soul of a dying Wicked One in a magnificent sword, which was later shattered into five pieces by Domivar, son of Mescator. Four pieces were destroyed by the men of Primovantor, but one piece fell into the hands of the Abyssal Dwarfs. They learned to channel the power of the shard, and may have used it to master the gargoyles and half-breeds. The Ironcaster that held the shard was always the most feared and respected of all Abyssal Dwarfs, if not always the most powerful.

“While the Soulshard was in the possession of our friend Ak-Shabarr, he had a disastrously unlucky meeting with a young elfmage named Alarion. Although the Ironcaster easily destroyed the mageling, Alarion's death curse tore the Soulshard from Ak-Shabarr's clutches and sent it flying around the earth for a year and a day. When it fell to earth again, it was discovered by Gravis who, recognizing the massive power of the artifact, used it to gain status among the mages of the Successor Kingdoms. Word of his exploits came to Ak-Shabarr's ears, and he turned all of his magic and spies to searching for Gravis and the Soulshard.

“Gravis soon discovered that he was being hunted, and being an unusually prudent mage, he hid the Soulshard so well that I doubt even the Green Lady knows where it is – certainly I do not – and joined the first mercenary company he came across in order to travel as randomly around Mantica as was possible. Unfortunately,

the minions of Ak-Shabarr picked up his trail in the Golloch Empire and alerted the Abyssal spies among the Free Dwarfs to his arrival. You have lived and breathed the rest of the tale."

"So we have, to our sorrow," Handal said. "However useful they may be in a pinch, next time a mage asks to join my troop I'll give him the flat of my blade and tell him to be off before he brings otherworldly doom and destruction on our heads!"

The Stone Priest Brogir's eyes twinkled. "A wise policy, sellsword. We dwarfs have never had such problems with wizards, but then," he puffed on his pipe before continuing, "we never have taken much of a liking to elves or mages. Anything demon-possessed is best left buried and forgotten, and we shall hope the Soulshard remains so till the end of days."

Brotherhood of Darkness

by Donn Turner

"All will fail, but a good man knows when to yield…"
-Marco the Elder

The cave was dark and wet, and smelled of old death, but Alexandre did not have a choice. The storm was raging overhead, and showed no signs of abating. Tired, cold, and soaked to the bone, he stumbled into the cave. Once he was deep enough into the cave to get out of the rain, he slowly sank to the ground, and tried to catch his breath.

After a moment, Alexandre realized that something was crawling across the back of his left hand. Looking down, he saw a large hairy spider slowly moving across his skin. Without thinking, he smashed the creature against the wall of the cave with a quick backhanded strike.

"It is not wise to kill a spider…" a voice declared from deeper inside the cave.

In an instant, Alexandre was on his feet in a defensive stance, with a dagger in his hand. "Who goes there?" Alexandre demanded.

"My apologies. I did not mean to alarm you. Please, allow me to light my lantern, and we may have a proper introduction," the strange voice replied.

Alexandre heard steel scraping on flint, and watched a steady flame appear from the brilliant sparks. He could just make out the form of an older man, dressed in ruined clothing, about ten feet deeper into the cave. He was carefully lighting an old and battered lantern.

"There. That's better. Now, we may be properly introduced," the stranger said. "I am Connor Thatcher, from Miren. Who might you be, Sir Knight?"

"Not interested in conversation," Alexandre said as he put away his

knife. He slowly returned to where he had collapsed earlier, but did not turn his head away from the older man.

“Very good, Sir,” Connor said, formally bowing his head. “I have some provisions, if you would like.” The older man reached into a worn sack, and pulled out a bundle wrapped in old cloth. He tossed the bundle to Alexandre.

Alexandre did not catch the ball of cloth, but instead let it land on the cave floor.

“Forgive me my lord, I am not trying to be a bother. I am merely trying to be polite,” Connor said.

After a moment, Alexandre relented, and slowly picked up the bundle. After cautiously unwrapping the cloth, he found a small loaf of bread and a bit of cheese. The familiar aroma of the cheese surprised Alexandre. “Where did you get this?” Alexander demanded.

“From a merchant not far from here. I believe that he brings his goods to the Brotherhood fortress to sell,” Connor replied. “My apologies. He did not have much of a selection when I chanced upon him.”

Alexandre did not reply, but filled his mouth instead. The food was pleasant, but far from the feasts that he was used to. After eating half of the bread, he turned his head, and looked out into the storm. Realizing that the winds and rain had not diminished in the slightest, Alexandre resigned himself to the fact that he was going to have to wait out the storm with his current company.

After some time, Alexandre looked back at the older man. “You have a strange manner of speaking for a thatcher,” Alexandre said.

“Yes, my lord. I am not from this land. I have traveled far in my time,” Connor replied.

“Miren…that’s a small town northwest of here, is it not?” Alexandre questioned.

“Why, yes it is, my lord. I was returning there after some time away, when the storm overtook me,” Connor replied.

Alexandre did not reply, but returned to watching the storm. Connor did not try to continue the conversation, leaving the weary knight alone with his thoughts. The sound of the storm soon filled the cave.

After an hour or so, Alexandre looked back at the old thatcher. He had rested his back against the cave wall, and pulled his tattered old cloak about himself. Alexandre could just see the man’s nose peeking out from under his hood.

“Do you have anything to drink old man? I am thirsty,” Alexandre stated.

“Why, indeed I do my lord,” Connor replied as he slowly started to rustle through his worn pack. After a moment, he produced an old bottle, and brought it to the weary knight.

“I have been saving this for a long time, just for such an occasion. It is a very rare, and very old, vintage. I do not think that you will find its like anywhere in these lands. But, be wary, for it is most potent,” Connor proudly stated as he offered the old bottle to Alexandre.

“We shall see,” Alexandre replied. After some difficulty with the stopper, Alexandre put the bottle to his lips, and took a long drought. He was not disappointed. The dark liquid had a very complex taste, and was most pleasing. Satisfied with the drink, Alexandre rested a little easier against the cave wall, and took another drink.

“If you will forgive me, my lord, I must say that I think I know of you,” Connor stated.

“Oh? Pray tell?” Replied Alexandre before he took another mouthful of the wonderful liquid.

“Well, I am no stranger to the beauty of heraldry…something I have picked up in my travels…and I could not help but notice yours. Are

you Sir Alexandre, the Hero of Blood Hill, Champion of Ogre Bluff, and Slayer of the Giant Vangor?" Connor inquired.

Alexandre looked at Connor with a sideward glance before taking another drink for the old bottle. After swallowing a mouthful, Alexandre replied, "Yes. I am Alexandre."

"Oh! What an honor, my lord!" Connor exclaimed. "I have heard of your valor. You are quite the topic of conversation in the taverns," Connor stated.

"I am?" Alexandre asked, his speech slightly slurred.

"Why yes! Everyone knows of your bravery and skill. You are a legend, my lord," Connor replied.

"Humph!" Alexandre snorted. "If only my…betters…held your opinion," Alexandre said with a heavy tongue.

"If I am not mistaken, your first victory was won when you were not but an Initiate! It was you that pierced the Goblin King's breast, pinning him to the ground. Their entire army fled as you lifted his head high for all to see!"

"…I was ordered to attack their war engines with the rest of the Initiates…but, the cowardly filth had no discipline, and their lines were a mess…I could see a gap that led straight to their general…so I took it…"

"Yes! You saw your opportunity, and claimed your victory. You won the day almost singlehandedly!"

"…that was a good day…but my commander didn't see it that way…," Alexander slurred.

"How could they not recognize your skill?" Connor replied. "Let me see…next, you slew the Orc Butcher at Blood Hill, am I correct?"

"…yes…that was a little more difficult…but I did it…" Alexander clumsily boasted before taking another drink.

“You were proclaimed the hero of the day as well, and won much acclaim.” Connor replied.

“…no…not…not like that…sure, I bested the beast…I put my lance right through his ugly face…but, they didn’t think that I was a hero…they said that I was…insub…in…”

“Insubordinate? Why, how could that be? You are a hero! You won the day, yet again,” Connor said sympathetically.

“I know what I did!” Alexandre shouted. “But, they don understhan…they are always going on and on about order and discipline…,” Alexandre said as he dismissively waived his hand.

“You have been a warrior without peer for years now. I have heard of your adventures, and I cannot fathom why they do not exalt you.” Connor stated.

“…be…’cause I am too good for ‘em…they can’t keep up with me… they are just…jealous...,” Alexandre replied with some bitterness.

“Oh, I understand, my lord. How difficult it must have been for you to be surrounded by such dullards,” Connor said with compassion.

“Hey….watch it…you are talking ‘bout the Brotherhood!” Alexandre shouted.

“Of course, my lord. Please, forgive me. I merely meant that someone of your…genius…should be an example to those beneath you.”

“…I tried…I tried so hard…all I wanted was to be an Exemplar…to be a hero…but…”

“They held you back.” Connor answered.

“No! No one holds me back! I am without equal!” Alexandre shouted as he staggered to his feet.

“Of course you are, my lord. I can see your frustration now. A true hero should be allowed to lead. To be the example for others to follow,” Connor said.

“…an…example…thas what I wanted…to be a hero…I spen so many nights…in the Council Chamber…waiting to be called…”

“Waiting to be called, my lord?” Connor asked.

“…yes…to be called…by…Valandor…to wear a…suit of…armor…” Alexandre muttered.

“But, your calling never came, did it my lord?”

“…no…”

“What happened to you, my lord? Why are you here?” Connor inquired.

“…I was in…the Council Chamber…I was tired of waiting…”

“Tired of waiting on Valandor’s call?” asked Connor.

“…I was…so…tired…of waiting…of their…disapproval…”
“What did you do, my lord?”

“I was…going to….take…my place…I was…going to…,” Alexandre struggled. The bottle fell from his grasp, and crashed on the rough floor. He slowly sank to his knees as tears started rolling down his cheeks.

“You were going to take on a suit of the sacred armor,” Connor stated.

“…yes…I was…going to take…what I…deserved…”

“And, why not, my lord? Who, other than you, has earned such a right?” Connor asked.
“…thas right…who else buh me…is…good…enuf…,” Alexandre struggled to say.

“They stopped you, didn’t they, my lord?” Connor asked.

“…yes…it…was…Marcus…Exemplar…”

“He was worried that you were going to eclipse him. You know that I am right,” Connor stated.

“…no…he was…my…commander…he…was…my…”

“I understand, my lord. You aspired to be like him,” Connor said with sympathy.

“NO! I was better than him! I was better than all of them!” Alexandre shouted from his knees.

“Yes, you are, my lord. You are better than all of them,” Connor replied.

“…what…what have I done?” Alexandre lamented with a cracked voice.

“You have done the only thing that you could have done, my lord. You have left those who will never be your equal. You have finally begun to fulfil your destiny. It is time for the world to know your name,” Connor said with conviction.

“…no…this…this is…not right…who…who are you?” Alexandre said as he looked around in confusion.

“You know that I am right, Alexandre. I have watched you for some time now,” Connor said as he approached the broken knight.

“…I…I…I’m not…vain…vainglory…,” Alexandre whispered as he slowly collapsed to the cave floor.

”Vainglorious? No, you are not. Vanity is a weakness of lesser men. For ones such as us, there is no vanity. There is only power,” Connor stated as he knelt beside Alexandre.

“…why…why did…why didn’t I listen…,” Alexandre sobbed.

“Because, you were made to rule,” Connor said as he slowly leaned down over the fallen hero.

“…wha….what are you…talking about?” Alexandre asked in confusion.

“I am not talking about the petty trials of some rabid zealots. The Brotherhood is nothing. I am talking about something much more…eternal. I am talking about taking your rightful place in history, where you belong,” Connor said as he started to gently remove Alexandre’s chainmail coif.

“…your…hands…so…cold…,” Alexandre mumbled as he looked up into Connor’s eyes.

“What if I told you that I can show you another…brotherhood? A brotherhood bound by blood, not some pathetic devotion to a lost legend,” Connor asked.

“…you…your skin…it’s so…pale…,” Alexandre stammered.

“Pay attention. I am not some simple tempter sent by the Abyss. What I am offering you is a gift beyond compare. I am offering you eternity. I am offering you a chance to be who you were born to be. Not some pathetic failure, but a god among men,” Connor boasted.

“…I…no…I…I…,” Alexandre muttered.

“Do not shy away from the desires within you. I know you, Alexandre. I have been waiting for someone like you for longer than you could imagine. You crave the power to show those fools that you were right. You want to prove that you are more than they ever could be.”

“…yes…”
“Very well. I am going to give you that power, Alexandre. I am going to give you more power than you can conceive of. But, there will be a price…” Connor stated as he took Alexandre’s head into his cold hands.

"…what…price…" Alexandre asked with difficulty.

"Do you know why you were never chosen to wear blessed armor, Alexandre? It's because you have a darkness within you. A cold, dark, hatred. A contempt for all things that are beneath you. But, I find no fault with you. In fact, I want to help you…nourish…your special talents." Connor stated.

"…you…still…have…not…" Alexandre almost whispered as his eyes began to close.

"Yes. The price. The price is…servitude, Alexandre. Eternal servitude."

"…no…" Alexandre breathed.

"Yes. Nothing can prevent your death now. Just as you are better than your peers, so too am I better than you. It is my right to take your life for my own. The wine that you so selfishly gulped down was mixed with an ancient poison. It is already working within you. The poison simply makes it easier for me to take your life. If you cannot resist, then I can take my time, and savor your essence."

Alexandre did not respond, and his body became limp.

"I am going to drink from you now. Your blood is going to bring me much pleasure. And, when your heart beats its last, I am going to give you my dark gift. I will fill your mouth with my blood. Your rebirth will not be pleasant. In fact, you will long for oblivion before it is over. But, if you can make it to the other side of death, I will show you a world that you never dreamed possible," Connor said as his eyes began to burn a hateful red.

"Together, we will forge a new brotherhood…a Brotherhood of Darkness…unlike anything known before it. You will be my Dark Prince, and I will be your Dark King. My price is high. Eternal servitude. But, in return, I also give you gifts that are beyond measure. I shall grant you power…and life eternal," Connor promised before he sank his fangs into Alexandre's neck.

The Oath Bind

by Chris Davis

For the follower who made it from the old world to the new one there were very few who had the ability to bend the forces of the ether. These few were binders of demons in the old world but here in their new home they found they could bend iron and shape fire, the latter a holdover from their old plane of reality. The former created a new tradition among the followers of the bull god.

The writ of iron a very powerful mark on any who was gifted one. A writ of iron granted the bearer access to any of the meager supplies that had been brought over and a command that was second only to the bull god. In fact so rare and powerful is the writ of iron that any who bears its mark his word is to be obeyed without question. This supreme power does of course lead to a problem. What if the bearer acts rashly like the bull god did in coming to this new land? What if the actions of a bearer leads to disasters? The prophets of the bull god were granted wisdom enough to create the writ of iron and also the sage vision of how to limit such power.

A recipient of the writ of iron is given a task when his writ is bestowed upon on him. He is also given a very clear understanding that if he fails by the time set his failure will be marked with extreme punishment. While it is true the users of magica in this new world no longer suffer the stone curse. They will suffer the iron curse if they fail while in use of the writ of iron.

Upon the date set of a task for a writ of iron if the task is failed. If it is deemed to not be what the writ was merited for the bearer of the writ, will be killed and his form bound in iron. It is this binding of iron that leads to creation of the iron guard, the immortals.

For one way the dawi zharr have overcome the problem of not enough of there own is to take their new found powers and to create numbers. All dawi view the immortals as part of their power base and as a easy solution to the lack of manpower. This rather frank attitude of resources is seen and simple and logical. For this reason dawi bestowed power and honors, fear becoming one of

many, no longer honored just another body in a sea of disposable resources. One of the hollow suits of iron that exist to obey and die at the whims of the dawi zharr.

This is yet a another small example of the will of a race to have survived the end of one world and make good in another.

Lapse of Vigilance

by William Buchanan

Very few understand the pivotal role that the Green Lady personally played in the event that brought the world to its current state. Never again would she allow herself to be a played pawn.

***

Shaken by the breeze beneath a brilliant blue sky, a drop of dew fell to the forest floor. It splashed the exposed root of a conifer initiating what would seem to be a lightning strike to any observer at the cellular level. The signal flashed upward through the tree, nourishing some miniscule fraction of its needs. But it also burrowed through the root and into the rich loam. From there it split and jumped across the roots of neighboring trees, losing intensity but gaining speed until it reached the eastern fringe of the Forest of Galahir, where she stood. She sensed it, and knew immediately the very leaf from which the dew drop fell, so many miles away. She knew its curves, its color, its weight, and the web of capillaries inside of it. She also knew the sources and meanings of a trillion other such unique impulses simultaneously inundating her mind: a continually bursting flood of information that had been there since the dam that was the Fenulian Mirror had been broken. What used to be an effortless connection had been reduced to something more physical; more chemical, more strained. But while she could no longer raise a mountain with a single thought, she still surely could through a great force of will.

While that leaf enjoyed a clear sky, here she endured a painful sight.

Legions of stalwart warriors clad in silver and blue crusaded down the hillside toward the battle line, where their brothers clashed with an ocean of demons. There, smoke and boiled blood mixed in the air to form a sickly veil, and even from up here at the edge of the battle she could hear the champions' zealous cries convert to screams of terror as they met the slaughter. It was a full tilt. For every man cut down, a monster was laid low; blood poured from the former, and liquid fire from the latter. Still, tens of thousands

remained and the battle line, already hundreds of feet long, grew ever longer as each army continued to pour to the sides in an effort to flank the other.

In the center of the fray was the object of both armies' affections: a decrepit stone spire, tall enough to pierce the roiling gray clouds.

"Suppose you are mistaken. Suppose it is not there?" she mused gravely to the knight at her side.

"There is no need to entertain even the thought of failure, my Lady. The finest scholars in all of Basilea concur that it's there," boomed Dulagan, the Basilean general.

"Stowed in the most obvious of places?"

"And where better? It took us thousands of years to deduce the location, and it was our own ancestors what did the hiding!" Dulagan's voice was a mix of pride and anxiety. "Rest assured my Lady, it's there. Buried 'neath the foyer."

For the hundredth time she considered the implications of their mission. Oskan's seal had been broken with the mirror, so many millennia ago. Though what happened was purely conjecture to her, the legend went that he managed to retain the neck chain, but its two medallions had been ripped away and scattered to parts of Mantica unknown, taking two thirds of his strength with them. Now, with the new knowledge that one of them lay buried under the husk of Alcadur, the world had been spun up.

They looked an odd pair, the Green Lady and Dulagan. One the portrait of masculinity, clad in decorated plate indicative of his standing, and bordering on outrageous. The other a literal half-goddess, long dark hair freely flowing over dyed green leather armor cut and stitched like leaves. It was odd, but this could not come to pass. She could only guess at what subterfuge had been required for the forces of the Abyss to learn the secret that the Basileans had uncovered, but the fact remained that with Two of Oskan's Three in the possession of the Abyss, Mantica would be a large step closer to cataclysmic unbalance. No, this could not come to pass. And so, when the Basileans implored her assistance, she

acquiesced.

The chirp of every bird and the trickle of every stream. The gush of blood from every wound and the scorching of every blade of grass. A torrent of sensation, ever connecting her to nature. Never in these recent times had she allowed herself to forget the moment that it had begun.

***

In the Time of Light, Seira beheld the gleaming ivory monument before her. There being no particular crisis, she had made a leisurely journey here to Alcadur, the watchtower of the gods. Of course, most Celestians did not need a literal tower in order to view the goings-on in Mantica, but Alcadur served as a useful symbol. Located in the geographic center of the land, it was a common pilgrimage destination as worshippers hoped to chance upon seeing the divine beings coming or going from it. One such band had made camp at the base of the tower, and startled when they saw the glowing form of a woman wrapped in shimmers of emerald crest a nearby hill.

Some prayed, some hollered, and some simply marveled as she strode past into the great open archway of Alcadur. Only a hundred feet in diameter and plain of décor save for some elaborate Celestian carvings that covered the wall, it truly was a monument to practicality and divinity, not opulence. She stood on the stone dais in the middle of the foyer, and it began to glow with a gentle radiant white. A moment later, she was blinked atop the tower, thousands of feet high. It was an unconventional method of entry, but a useful ward against any being that was not a Celestian.

The wall of the cylindrical chamber was a heavenly crystalline glass that gave a glorious view of all of Mantica. Inscribed in the smooth stone floor was ring of solid gold, a few feet less in diameter than the room itself. Dotted along the ring were many smaller circles demarking where individuals would position themselves once called to order. Three of them were larger than the others and adorned with colored gemstones. On these would stand the three major aspects: Ericke of men, Gendholm of the dwarves, and Seira of the elves.

Seira noted that she was last to arrive. Across the chamber through the mingling she spotted a lesser Celestian, brown hair over an ashen complexion and wearing a black bear skin as a robe. Seira strode over to meet her.

Liliana smiled. “You called off your hunters.”

“I told my people to temper their sport. Too many bucks were lost this year,” Seira replied, knowing full well where the conversation was headed.

“But wouldn’t you call that natural order?”

At this Seira had to smile. She’d grown fond of the young Celestian in recent decades. Liliana was also attuned to nature, though she had a particular preoccupation with the ‘death and decay’ side of it. Things dying and their mass recycled to bring new life was her fascination. She did not seek it or revel in it. It simply brought her joy, as would the secular focus for any Celestian. And so, Seira did not hold it against her. But Liliana had made a valid point.

“The behaviors of a race are surely natural. But I did not decree that they stay their bows. I implored their lords to consider the cascade of events if they were to continue. A loss of too many creatures upsets the natural order; populations of other creatures die off or explode as a result. The forest becomes unstable and those that survive will leave. Even you would not be able to enjoy the garment you wear this very moment. So you see, I did not give any mandate. I showed them what will be, and they changed.”

Liliana looked down at the thick bearskin draped from her shoulders, and began to reply when Gendholm’s voice boomed across the chamber. “Order.”

All moved to their locations on the ring with a grace unachievable by mortal-kind. Seira took her place on one of the three major pedestals. Over the next several minutes, dozens of minor Celestians provided reports on the condition of their portions of Mantica, be it a geographic region or a facet of reality. Eventually, the turn passed to the one called Oskan, who took the form of a well-dressed young

man adorned with a particularly elegant silver necklace from which hung two medallions of differing size, shape and color.

“I have spoken with the elf Fenulian. His achievements dwarf those of all other mortals, and yet he cannot secure the one thing he longs for most: his one true love Elinathora.” began Oskan.

They all knew of Calisor Fenulian, an elven mage considered throughout Mantica to be perhaps the most accomplished mortal to ever live. His rumored deeds were fantastic: moving oceans, stepping between planes, and treating with dragons to name a few.

Oskan continued, “But I have offered him a way.”

“Tampering with the fortunes of mortals is dangerous. Our place is to lead them, not direct them. Why would you do this?” asked Ericke.

“I took pity on him.”

“Why?”

“Because we can walk the world free of consequence. There is nothing unavailable to us and yet I believe I speak for all of you - even you three - when I say that we too long for something unreachable. We will never experience the desire that Calisor Fenulian does, unrequited or not. It is the unavoidable consequence of our very nature. You know this to be true.”

There was a long silence.

“I gave Fenulian the means to construct a mirror through which he and Elinathora might observe their future. Of course, what he considers to be ‘magic’ is but an empty wind without our consent, and so I seek your approval to enchant this mirror and let it display what is needed, if and when he completes its construction.”

There was another long silence.

Gendholm of the dwarves spoke first. “I agree. There’s fire in his heart! Would that I could trade places with him. Let’s give all

mortals a beacon of hope!"

Ericke of men spoke second. "I say no. We are to curate creation, not intervene in the affairs of mortals."

All then turned to Seira of the elves, as if for mediation (although there was no precedent for this sort of thing). It was fitting that the issue come down to her since the subject at hand, Fenulian, was one of her people. Seira paused a long while, and then spoke.

"Look at the mortal's intentions. He aims to manipulate the emotions of another, to thwart what was a very natural conclusion. Look at his works. Have his conquests gone to his head, such that he now dares to consider himself our peer? Both he and Oskan are out of order."

Another long silence.

"What will be done?" asked some other lesser Celestian.

She turned to Oskan. "You have made a commitment to the mortal, and to undo that now is to undermine our very credibility. So, the future must be revealed to this him, but it must revealed in its entirety. Life, glorious or not, ends in but one manner. That ending and what follows it must be considered too." Across the council, she noticed Liliana's posture stiffen. "When Elinathora looks upon the mirror, we will show her the future, true and bare and complete. She will be educated as to the state of the world that goes on without her. Only then can her decision be one of balance."

"Very well," said Oskan. And so the council was concluded.

But Oskan, whose aspect was time itself, knew that decades from now on Elinathora's deathbed, a golden bird would perch on the windowsill and sing her final lullaby.

The remainder is well known lore. Calisor Fenulian did eventually harvest a beam of light from the Star of Heaven. He did complete the mirror. And Elinathora did look upon it. And while she was warmed to see a glorious age of harmony and peace, her delight turned to black terror when she witnessed the downfall of her

family, a tragedy initiated by her natural passing and which would endure for centuries.

But then, that fear caused her to do something that neither Seira nor Oskan had foreseen, as the minds of mortals are fickle things.

She shattered the mirror.

***

Dulagan's shield exploded into seven pieces, but at least the cruel head of the mace had been deflected. As the massive body of the roaring Moloch reared up, five knights who had spurred to assist Dulagan arrived, implanting their spears in the monster's chest. In a foot-deep puddle of blood, he caught his breath before jolting to his feet and back into action.

The fight had begun to sway when Dulagan and the Green Lady personally entered the fray. Cries of "drive them back east!" began to take hold. With every sword slash, felled demon, and takedown of their more sizeable beasts, the Basileans gained palpable confidence. The sea of black horns and crimson sinew dwindled to a lake. The battle line was beginning to collapse.

***

The mirror was broken, and with it the Celestians were rent in two.

But Seira in her wisdom had used that instant to reach out and touch the land. Through ancient channels she made her plight to all the world's flora and fauna, and they heard her. They offered no resistance to her influence, permitting her to inhabit some portion of their own souls and thereby establish an anchor in reality. From this tether, her consciousness remained composed enough to survey the madness around her.

Often, when mortals talk about glimpsing beyond the physical and into the realm of the divine or "supernatural," they recount some profoundly mystical experience - an epiphany so strong as to induce tears, a vision conveying a lesson from another time, a strange sense of clarity, or even a conversation with the personified form of

a god. But that is the realm where Celestians normally exist, and so for them this experience was comparable. Seira - and all Celestians - witnessed a tear in the fabric of reality itself. Every aspect in the room shifted and split as if their shadows had decided to forsake their corporeal bodies. Everyone but Seira. A split second later, the chamber disappeared from sight as all were drawn into a shrieking alien void. Amid a swirling maelstrom of disturbing colors that had never been (and could never be) seen in the physical world, the essences of the Celestians churned in agony. For the first time, they experienced pain.

Somewhere in the storm, Seira saw a dark swatch. It was no more than a black smudge on a child's chaotic painting, but she surely recognized Liliana's spirit. In a way that she didn't quite understand, she reached out – with her mind? her arm? her soul? – and attempted to secure it, but was met with a searing pain that caused her to retreat. Still, that brief contact was enough for Liliana to get through a message; not in words, but in pure emotion that Seira found herself able to understand.

Embrace me. No matter my resistance, please save me. I desire to hurt you, but I hate that desire. I cannot explain it.

Again Seira attempted to grasp, and again she recoiled as Liliana's rebellious howling splintered through her mind. Suddenly she noted that the swirling of the ether was slowing, and through some of the waves she could actually see glimmers of reality: a forest on fire, a storeroom collapsing, a graveyard in tumult, Alcadur decaying...she sensed that the storm was ending, and guessed that with it Liliana too might fade and be lost. Resolving every last particle of her being (or whatever "being" meant in this place), she reached out and wrapped her essence around Liliana's. Although Seira could not possibly make the following comparison, a mortal would say that the sensation was akin to bear-hugging a pile of liquid molten iron slag. Her final impulse was lament; Oskan knew what her verdict would be, and he knew that the mortal would not heed his warning. Never again would she allow herself to be a played pawn. Both Celestians screamed together in the anti-cosmos until pure blackness finally overcame all.

***

The pitch silence of the foyer which had sustained for millennia was finally broken as the massive stone blockade was rolled away from the entrance. Sunlight filtered by the overcast sky and then the fog of battle danced upon surfaces that hadn't been illuminated in ages. Dulagan and several dozen of his personal guard followed the Green Lady inside. Though the last demon had fled, the field outside was silent now in anticipation of the real prize.

She walked slowly to the dais in the middle of the room, same as she had done so many lifetimes ago. With so few Celestians having survived to still walk the world, none had ever bothered return here since the breaking of the mirror.

Suddenly a startle cascaded through the ranks of soldiers as two thick vines crawled along the ground from the ground outside, making their way to the dais. The Green Lady looked to be in a trance. Like tentacles they coiled around the circular platform and began to pull upward with the sound of taught ropes keeping a sail in check. The Green Lady strained, and the stone budged. Over the next minute it was withdrawn, revealed to be a ten foot deep cylindrical plug, scraping along the circular bore in which had been installed. Finally it was removed and cast aside.

The envoy descended with aplomb.

Sure enough, beneath the ruins of Alcadur, the ancient Basileans had dug out a large room some hundred feet across, and on a simple pedestal at the far end glimmered a small metallic disc.

Dulagan and the Green lady approached it as the rest of the men gradually filed in behind, their accumulated torchlight now sufficient to fill the entire subterranean chamber. The medallion was three inches across, solid gold and carved somewhat to resemble a seashell. A dark ruby was set in the center, and the entire assembly crackled with tiny arcs of pink lightning every few seconds.

Dulagan let out a great roar, to which his men chimed in. They raised bloodied gauntlets in victory, clapped each other's shoulders, and beamed smiles enough to out-illuminate their torches. For

minutes it went on. Dulagan personally strode through the ranks congratulating and thanking each and every man. So low were inhibitions that the Basileans used profane language to express the thrill of victory over the hordes of the Abyss, and the acquisition of an artifact so precious to their evil god.

But in the fervor, Dulagan forgot himself. “Now we have Two of Three! Now we have him cornered! Mark my words, men, before we lie in the earth, we too will have Oskan’s chain, and then your sons and daughters will tell of how their fathers purged the demon god from Mantica!” His proclamation was met with a roar of approval.

“What?” said a composed feminine voice from the back of the room.

Dulagan and his army fell silent and looked to the altar. He noted a slight change in the Green Lady’s posture; perhaps a dip of the head or a hunch of the shoulders. Her irises expanded until her eyes turned solid green, which then collapsed to an oily jet. The intangible misty aura about her turned from emerald to ashen. Without pomp or circumstance, she picked up the medallion and turned to leave, promptly meeting a line of spearmen.

“My Lady, what – what are you doing?!” one of them managed.

The tenor of her voice had lowered drastically. “You will refer to me as Liliana. And you will stand down.”

“Stay your ground, men!” barked Dulagan, who turned to the Green Lady. “We cannot do that, my Lady.”

“When you asked my help, you did not tell me that the other medallion was already accounted for. You did not tell me you’d already retrieved the Third piece.”

“My lady, we did not lie.”

“You purposefully told half of the truth. And now you propose to create further unbalance in the world. I have seen this before.”

For the first time in his career, Dulagan shifted uncomfortably. The

eyes of his men were darting back and forth. “Surely you can understand my Lady, it was for the greater good. The greatest good! We will have the means to keep Oskan at bay for…for…well, forever!” He ended with an upward resolve bordering on frustration.

“You would hold a god hostage?” she sneered, an eyebrow rising sharply.

“Only…only those that would do evil!” the general stammered.

Enough. She mentally latched onto several clusters of the countless invisible strings attuning her to nature and surged an alien energy back through them. In several locations behind the wall of Basilean soldiers, the earth came alive in a most peculiar and violent way.

Never again would she allow herself to be a played pawn.

Questonomics

by Dennis Browning-Saunders

There are many tales of great mages…Calisor Fenulian; who created great works of art and magic, and almost managed to nearly destroy the sum total of civilisation on Mantica. Valandor the Great; a man who would not be known as 'the Great' without having performed deeds that were at least grand or higher.

Just once, Bannon the Mage, with his self-equipped title, wondered if those same giants of power had merely used people's stupidity against them. It was a depressing train of thought.

He sighed, and dumped out the sack-load of bones unceremoniously on the floor. He looked over the contents, and sighed again.

"What," he asked, picking up a small shape, "is this? Cat?"

His assistant for the evening's work, a young farmhand named Tom and useful only to help carry things, squinted at the skull. "Er… yeah, I think so. We just kind of…gathered…everything you asked for. Is that okay?"

Bannon turned the former pet head and looked into the empty eye sockets. "I guess it will have to do. I hope you managed to gather at least one or two actual people? Heroes aren't going to want to come and save a village that's under the curse of Mittens the Undying."

Tom patted a sack beside him, but carefully, as if the contents were much more important than the other bodily remains. "My Aunt Gabby. I don't think she'll require much magic to raise. She was pretty much an unholy terror while she was alive."

Bannon raised his eyebrows. "Gabby, huh? The name needs some work, but the story writes itself. An evil witch in life, consorting with Abyssals and foul spirits of a perverted nature, raised from the dead by her own unending evil…yeah, your little village will be pulling in all sorts of heroes, ready to crush skulls and, more importantly, spend their gold."

"So…this is what you do? Go around villages turning caves into lairs for monsters?" Tom asked, placing Gabby's remains down with a great deal more care than the robed mage.

"Yeah, pretty much. It's called 'questonomics'. Heroes have gold, and when they hear you have monsters to kill, they come here, spend a little of that gold on your smithy, the inn, what have you, and then move on. My job is to set up the cave, or church, or ancient ruin of another age, whatever you happen to have in the local area."

"You need Aunt Gabby for that? Couldn't you just…raise an Abyssal?"

"Ha! You lot aren't rich enough to afford an Abyssal. How am I going to make a living giving away free Abyssals to every dirt poor village that asks? No; you get undead. Don't have to feed 'em, see? Even goblins need to be fed, and they're a pain for not sticking in the lair. You get a binding spell that resurrects the dead every full moon, if they haven't been too crushed, mangled or blessed. If they are, you just throw some more skeletons in here. Or bodies, if you have dead adventurers. Really it looks after itself. Here, pass me that book. The one with the human face on it."

Tom picked up the book while making every attempt not to look at it. "But don't the heroes know? I mean, won't they figure out that the undead keep rising near our village?"

Bannon sat down on a barrel holding a skeleton. It was an old trick; the heroes opened the barrel expecting treasure, for whatever reason, and got a knife in the eye. Good fun. Why they always expected treasure was beyond him; to the best of the mage's knowledge, treasure was not often kept in mouldy barrels. He looked up from a page of writhing lettering.

"Look, kid, you seem like a nice destitute villager, so I'll let you in on a little secret; heroes are morons. If they weren't, they wouldn't have gone into heroing. They have no idea about what goes into setting these quests up, and they don't care. I'll toddle off to the next town, sit in the inn with my cowl drawn up to hide my face in shadows, and before you know it you'll be knee deep in

swordswomen named Sonja and men who can barely fit through the doorway because of the muscles and armor. And your mayor will have given me a few gold pieces, but not too many or I would have summoned you an Abyssal, and I'll be on to the next potato-based economy or Baron that wants a picturesque banshee in his hold."

"Moss."

"What? What do you mean, moss?"

"We don't grow potatoes. We're moss farmers."

There was a moment's silence, as Bannon seemed to consider this. He had closed the arcane book, which trembled in his hands.

"Doesn't moss just occur naturally?"

"Don't potatoes?" Tom asked back.

"Alright, fair point. You learn something new everyday."

"It's medicinal." Tom said, on the defence.

"Oh yeah, I can see why that would be important. Look…I wouldn't normally do this, but I might manage one Abyssal. A small one, mind. I think you guys are going to need all the help you can get."

"I didn't realise that's how it worked. I thought people just went out and had adventure." Tom said, sitting down, rather neglectfully, on a bag that contained former neighbours.

"Look at it like this…how old are you?"

"Sixteen, why?"

"Right, and a lot of lads and lasses your age toddle off out of the village to have those adventures. But, the thing is, there is only so much adventure to go around! I'm nearly sixty, and the only adventures I've seen are ones I created for other people. Sure, there might be some trapped Abyssal in a mine somewhere, tormenting the locals, but how often do you think that happens naturally?"

He didn't bother to wait for a reply before continuing. "Not often, is the answer. And those adventuring heroes, they have gold they need to spend, armor they need repaired, tithes to give for the pious ones, of course. And that money could do your village some good, right? And then, in a couple of months when the money is flowing well, maybe your mayor will give me a yell, and I'll come over with a few more pets. Got a friend who makes traps too. A dwarf, good… er, man. He'll give you a deal on some of the usual. Spiked pits. Big axes that fall out of the ceiling, that kind of thing."

"Could you get a dragon?"

"A drag…can I get…are you out of your mind!" He waved at the ceiling, fully two feet above their heads. "How am I going to get it in here? What will it eat? Dragons are for abandoned dwarf holds, lad, not moss farms. You'd be hard pressed to get a troll in here, and even then he'd be kneeling!"

"Right, sorry."

"Well, you weren't to know." Bannon said, but Tom heard him muttering under his breath. The word 'dragon' seemed to appear several times.

"Right. I think we are ready to raise the dead, including Aunt Gabby the witch…just watch yourself, they can be a bit difficult to manage until I can get the control spells in place."

"Aunt Gabby was no witch. Well, not really. Even though that's what some people called her."

"It's just the story, lad. Your average hero likes a good legend to go with his questing. The Kitten Eating Witch of Moss Farm will draw more attention than Aunt Gabby, Nuisance. Now, watch yourself."

Bannon raised one arm straight above his head, the other held the book close to his face, as he began to recite the ancient and terrible words. At least, Tom assumed they were ancient and terrible; he didn't understand them. But the bones one the floor, separated into piles, started to rattle and move, like the macabre jigsaw puzzle.

The torchlight twisted and contorted as a foul smelling breeze passed through the caves, and Bannon's voice rose to a shout, before cutting to silence. The breeze died. The light steadied.
There were thirty skeletons now, and more scattered through the caves, Tom knew, placed there earlier by the two men. He felt a chill run through him as the dead stood to attention, waiting, watching without eyes.

"Well, that went well." Bannon said cheerfully, clapping his hands together. "I'd have liked to see more rusty weapons, but frankly your smith isn't very good at making even worthless weapons. Look, Aunt Gabby only has a bread knife. Still, beggars can't be choosers."

"What about the Abyssal, do you summon that now?"

The cheerful expression fled Bannon's face. "Yeah, about that. The thing is, your mayor already paid extra for the Abyssal. But summoning? It is not the same as necromancy."

"I don't understand?" Tom said, with a sinking feeling that he actually understood all too well.

"Requires a bit more than old bones, is what I am getting at. You were, um, volunteered…"

Tom realised that he was surrounded by dead friends and relatives, and possibly pets, armed with a collection of embarrassing but sharp utensils. He sensed a presence from behind him, and turned into the empty gaze of Aunt Gabby.

"Sorry, kid." Bannon said, as the bread knife jabbed forward. "Some of us just aren't born to be the heroes."

At What Price

by Donn Turner

Ianel and Elizabet stood quietly in the middle of the windblown street. Once, there had been life here. The commotion of the market square. The clamor of the blacksmiths beating on their anvils. The laughter of children.

Now, there was only the sound of the north wind gently playing with the dry leaves of autumn. Instead of breathing some life back into the grey stillness of the ruined city, the crisp crackle of the dry leaves only seemed to reinforce the feeling this was no longer a place for the living. This was a place of loss. Of regret. Of death.

“Why do you torture yourself so?” Elizabet whispered, finally breaking the long silence.

“Humph…I could ask you the same thing.” Ianel replied.

“I come here, because I know that you will be here.” Elizabet said with a little sadness in her voice.

“Am I that predictable?” Ianel Asked.

“No. You are many things, my old Master, but predictable is not one of them. You are too…good…for our profession.” Elizabet replied.

“Ha! How can you say that? Especially here, of all places?” Ianel retorted.

“Because, unlike so many of us, you feel. It is your one weakness. You care about those around you. You care about the ones that get hurt. Especially the…children…”

“That’s enough!” Ianel interrupted.

“I…I’m sorry…” Elizabet apologized as she lowered her gaze to the old cobblestone street.

"…No…No, it is I that should be apologizing to you, my…my…my old friend. I am sorry for raising my voice. I am…sorry…that I dragged you here so many times before. I am sorry that you had to witness the site of my biggest…failure." Ianel struggled.

"Ianel…you cannot blame yourself for this any longer. You had no choice. You know that." Elizabet replied.

"I…I was so…sure, that we could stop him. I was so convinced of our…righteousness." Ianel admitted.

"He was a beast. A monster. You were right to put him down. If you hadn't…his disease would have spread." Elizabet countered.

"Maybe. But...I…I fear…that…once you know the whole truth of it, you may not be so forgiving." Ianel struggled.

"What more is there to know? You are an Inquisitor. A Master of the Order, no less. It is your sacred duty to hunt down and destroy the filth that plagues our world. He was a threat. A perversion. It was your duty to destroy him." Elizabet pressed as she drew near Ianel.

"Yes. Yes, that is so. But, I never told you the whole story." Ianel admitted.

"I've read your accounts. You have told me the tale. You were praised for your efforts." Elizabet countered.

"No…I have not shared the…whole…story. Not with anyone. It is my…old wound. I thought that it would heal. With time. Maybe, with enough time, it would not hurt me so." Ianel said with obvious regret in his voice. He slowly sank down to sit on the edge of a broken stone fountain. He looked tired. Defeated.

"I am not your confessor, Ianel. I am your student. I am your peer. But, most importantly, I am your friend. Your…good friend. Please. Please tell me what hurts you so." Elizabet consoled.

"I was…young…so young…as you may remember. I had just been taken as an Apprentice by Alek. He was…such a good teacher. He

inspired me, Elizabet. He was so pure. So good. The light of the Shining Ones seemed to gleam out of his eyes. He was so easy to follow. Like following the light of the sun. So full of warmth. He…he was a holy terror to his enemies. Of that, I can assure you!" Ianel remembered.

"You have always spoken of him fondly." Elizabet replied softly.

"He was…well…we had a lead. It was just a rumor, really. Someone saw a beast. You know how it is. Some farmer gets a belly full of sour wine, sees his shadow, and suddenly the hills are alive with demons. But, we had just finished prosecuting another case, so we looked into the story. Turns out, the lead was a merchant, and not one to dismiss out of hand. So, we came here, to Northwind." Ianel remembered.

"Yes. I remember reading your account. The merchant was of noble birth, and had many years of education, did he not?" Elizabet asked.

"That's correct. He had assumed control of his family business, and was trying to live up to his obligations. He was also a pious man, being tutored by monks during childhood. We were lucky, at the start. Had Ormont not asked the lad to join his…pack…then we may have never known that there was a problem." Ianel reflected.

"What became of that merchant?" Elizabet inquired.

"He…he did not survive…" Ianel struggled.

"I'm…sorry….please continue." Elizabet encouraged.

"When we first arrived in Northwind, it was a growing little city. The demand for mammoth ivory and hides was strong at that time, and the nomad tribes wanted forged metal, so the merchants were making quite a bit of coin buying and selling. Northwind could have been great. It had everything going for it. We reasoned that this why Ormont had chosen Northwind as his hide." Ianel stated as he looked out at the vacant city.

"He was the sixth son of a failing line. He had nothing but the

arrogance of station." Elizabet remembered.

"Yes. He was a spoiled little noble that always believed that he deserved more. Through various unsavory means, he gathered a group of outcasts and mercenaries to his banner. Selling themselves out to the worst of petty tyrants and would be kings, he amassed a small fortune. But, it was never enough. Somewhere along his travels, he acquired the power of lycanthropy. The curse only empowered Ormont to commit greater and greater acts of cruelty." Ianel said with obvious venom in his voice.

"In all of these years, I have only heard you mention his name a few times, but it is always with bitterness in your voice." Elizabet observed.

"His kind disgusts me. He could have done so much in this world. But, instead, he served only himself." Ianel fumed.

"Please continue with your account." Elizabet encouraged.

"By the time we arrived in Northwind, Ormont's little band of cutthroats had already wormed their way into the wealthier families of the city. We heard tales of wild parties, strange disappearances, and animal mutilations. It was not difficult to discern the truth of things, even for those blessed by ignorance. Ormont did little to hide his activities. Maybe he felt so emboldened by that time, he simply did not care to hide." Ianel reflected.

"If only all heretics announced themselves so openly…" Elizabet mused.

"So, we moved on him. At that time, it was only Alek, myself, and three other assets. They were good assets, but Alek was not foolish. So, we used a fake identity, and had the town guard surround the large house that Ormont and his crew were reveling in that night. We thought that if we hit them hard and fast, they would not know the danger until it was too late. Just to be sure, we had silver edged weapons and crossbow bolts." Ianel stated.

“But, it did not go according to plan. Alek was lost.” Elizabet continued.

“…yes. Alek fell that night.” Ianel said in an uncharacteristically small voice.

“So far, you have recounted the tale as I have heard many times. We lose friends. That is the nature of our business. You know this.” Elizabet pointed out.

“Yes. Yes, we lose friends. Alek’s death saddened many of his peers and associates. But, that is not what pains me so. Not for all of these years.” Ianel confessed.

“You can trust me. Unburden yourself, so that we can move beyond this pain.” Elizabet urged.

“…During the strike…” Ianel hesitated.

“Please.” Elizabet encouraged as she took Ianel’s hand into her own.

“Alek and I had kicked in the door that barred entry into a small room. It was nothing more than the servant’s quarters…” Ianel struggled.

“You can trust me. Please share your pain with me.” Elizabet consoled as she gently kissed Ianel’s trembling hand.

“…There was a girl…not more than 12 summers…she was so pretty. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. She was terrified. Alek moved into the room, while I blocked the door. He challenged the little girl, who cowered in fear. Alek held out his hand to keep the girl at bay, and turned to inspect a large wardrobe to his left. The little girl looked at me. So innocent. So…” Ianel stumbled.

“I’m here.” Elizabet whispered.

“…She…smiled at me…her eyes…her blue eyes…they were turning yellow…” Ianel struggled.

“What happened Ianel?” Elizabet asked in a soft voice.

“…I…I could…I couldn’t fire. She was just a girl! She was just a 12 year old girl!” Ianel sobbed.

“The enemy takes on many forms. You taught me that. You must know that she wasn’t just a little girl.” Elizabet soothed.

“…She…she pulled a carving knife from behind her dress…Alek never saw her move…it was my responsibility…I was supposed to cover him…I was supposed to protect him…” Ianel cried.

“It’s OK. I’m here. I’m here my love.” Elizabet sobbed as she cradled Ianel in her arms.

“…She…she moved so fast…she rammed that knife right through his breastplate…no little girl should move so fast…should be so strong…” Ianel cried.

The two Inquisitors sat for a long time in the cold. They both cried. After some time, they gradually regained their composure.

“I watched Alek fall to the floor. The little girl smirked at me, mocking my hesitation. I put a silver tipped bolt right through her forehead. When her body hit the floor, it was half girl and half wolf. I ran to Alek’s side, but it was too late. With his last breath, he pulled me close, and told me to let none escape.” Ianel said with no emotion.

“He was right, of course. If but one of them escaped, they could spread the curse to another.” Elizabet stated.

“Yes, he was right. So, we burned them all. We were…very thorough. After that night, I dismissed the assets. They were good assets. But, they had seen enough. They had endured enough. I had them watched, of course. Just to be sure. None of them turned. But, they never took up arms again.” Ianel stated.

“And, one by one, the townsfolk left. Northwind died a slow death. Ormont killed this town with his evil. You had to do what you had to do.” Elizabet consoled.

“Every year, I come to this damned place. Not out of remorse. Not out of guilt. I would burn them all a hundred times again, if I could. No. I come here, because I need to remind myself, that there is a cost to what we do.” Ianel said with conviction.

“At what price?” Elizabet wondered aloud.

“Everything. The price is everything that we are. We give all in service to others. Not for praise. Not for glory. We do it, because it must be done. We pay the price for humanity’s survival with our very souls. Not a single night goes by where I don’t see her face. Not a single night goes by when I don’t scream at myself to pull the trigger. To save him. But, I can’t. He dies. And she mocks me.” Ianel admits.

“The price is high. Too high. But, as you said, it must be paid.” Elizabet reflected.

“I’m sorry that I brought you into this life. I’m sorry that I burden you with…” Ianel apologized.

“Hush. If you will recall, I was the one to seek you out. And, you did warn me. I just didn’t listen.” Elizabet interrupted.

“Thank you. I just needed to…get that out. It is an old wound.” Ianel said, standing.

“I am always here for you. Just as you are always here for me. You know that you are vindicated, just as Alek was vindicated. You got them all.” Elizabet said, rising.

“Yes. We got them all.” Ianel said, as the pair turned, and started the long walk out of the city.

Just as the Inquisitors vanished from sight down a small alley, the pale moonlight was caught in the yellow eyes of a large black beast.

The Battle of Crowburg Grove

by "BAE"

Chikuaq looked down and stared at the blade in his scaled hand. The simplicity of its design belied the quality of its supreme craftsmanship. Its handle was molded to sit perfectly when tightly gripped and arced into a viciously sharp edge in a single, solid piece of magmite steel. He had used it in countless battles to fell innumerable foes since it was forged at the heart of the Three Kings, but still the weapon was as keen as the day he had first lifted it from the master blacksmith's fires. He wondered whether Tepotzil was still practicing his art, surrounded by those pools of bubbling lava from which the products of his craft were made. He remembered the rows of axes hanging from the cavern ceiling, waiting for their third and final tempering. And being led to the pit from which this killing tool was to be pulled. The drawing of this blade from the seething fires was the culmination of many years of excruciating training, from his birth in the spawning pool right through to adulthood and the right to wield a weapon and fight for his race. He remembered pushing his hand into the thick, searing liquid to press his unique imprint into the shape of the handle, then drawing it out carefully but surely until he could feel the full weight unsupported by the pit from which it had been born. It had been years since he had seen Tepotzil or the fiery peaks of the Three Kings, he realized. It never seemed that long until you thought about it.

The sounding of great war drums and horns from across the undulating landscape snapped him back to the present. As the earth rumbled from the orcs starting their advance, Chikuaq relaxed and allowed the military training ingrained into his very fiber assert itself. Feet shoulder width apart, one foot slightly behind the other, knees bent, arms wide, stance ready. He imagined his homeland and what he was fighting for, and how much his orc opponents were a vile antithesis to everything he found sacred. The building rage of his burning hot core flooded his entire being, singeing the grass around his feet and causing a thin smoke to exude from his nostrils. Pure, violent heat coursed through his veins and limbs, his palm heating the handle and then blade to white hot. A thin, keening sound from the blade grew louder and louder as the sheer

amount of energy being imbued into the blade reached its limit. Chikuaq screamed a hiss as the anger built, and as the twin sounds transformed into an ear-piercing screech, the sword burst suddenly into flame, roaring and spitting its readiness for battle. By this point, smoke was billowing from his nose and mouth, his inside a raging inferno, perfectly ready for the battle ahead. Although Chikuaq had been briefed on the battle strategy by a ghekkotah runner, there was little need to have done so considering his experience. He looked left and right at the front rank of his regiment, each salamander waiting patiently for his command. Raising his weapon arm to the skies, the sword now acted as a flaming beacon indicating to his regiment to ready themselves for action. Bringing it down swiftly in the direction of the enemy, the unit started marching forward in unison.

A deluge of hulking green savages wielding crudely constructed axes was flowing towards the full width of the salamander battle line. Across to his right, in the middle of the field, a horde of greenskins carrying especially huge, spiked axes was building its momentum towards the center. Looming behind the mass of orcs, lumbering trolls in skin loincloths flailed small boulders strapped to broken tree branches as though they were already engaged with the enemy. Screeches and snarls and bawls rose from the writhing plague like a thousand wolves calling to the moon, yet despite this wall of noise Chikuaq could still hear the deep booming of war drums emanating from somewhere within. His nose twitched with the stench of unclean, sweating, muscular bodies, covered in streaks of rotting blood from previous foes which travelled the length of the battlefield long before the orc front line. Behind all of this, a huge giant; a mountain of bone, sinew and flesh; loomed over all. Although the beast carried an entire tree as a weapon, Chikuaq knew that it was just as adept at stomping, punching and biting anything that stood in its path. The krudger that commanded the army was no doubt somewhere near the giant. Krudgers may have reached the top of orc society, if it could ever be called that, but that didn't entail any refinement; they still derived the same sick enjoyment from watching pain inflicted on others, and a giant was guaranteed to deliver.

On his own side, a swarm of ghekkotah carrying shields and shortspears made up the majority of the front line. Although nearly the size of a human, these amphibians looked tiny compared to the

bulk of both orcs and salamanders. Their movement seemed chaotic but Chikuaq could see their many head crests displaying a bewildering myriad of changing colors as they communicated to organize rough battle lines. On their own he would have worried that they would be too weak to stem the sheer strength of the oncoming creatures, but towering above them all in the center was a hulking ankylodon. The monstrous reptilian beast crushed the ground with each ponderous step, the long horns protruding from its forehead and spiny protrusions down its sides shaking with each impact. The wooden platform on its back carried blowpipe-wielding ghekkotah peering over the side to survey the scene below. Ankylodons had long been in service to salamander armies and as such Chikuaq knew the devastating power that they could deliver. Behind this formidable front line, a horde of salamander unbloodeds readied themselves to charge through the ghekkotah once the latter had stemmed the orc advance. Although these salamanders had passed their rigorous training they had not yet fought enough battles to prove themselves, so fighting alongside them was the battle captain leading the army, Melathaq. On the flanks were two stronger, more experienced units; a regiment of highly decorated ceremonial guard across to the right and his own unit of salamander warriors to the left. These would defeat their respective opponents and wheel inwards, forcing the orcs to fight in three directions. Finally, a salamander mage-priest, energy crackling all around him, was preparing himself just to the right of Chikuaq's warriors.

Due to their slightly larger frames, the orcs wielding the spiked axes in the center were pulling ahead of the rest of the line. Chikuaq was slightly relieved that his unit wasn't further to the middle; the fight between such strong brutes and the enormous ankylodon was going to be a thankless carnage. Still, all the ankylodon, ghekkotah and unbloodeds had to do was hold the line until the flanking units could rout their opponents and turn. Increasing his speed, he glanced across and saw the ghekkotah atop the ankylodon's howdah release a volley of blowpipe darts. A handful of the fastest orcs slammed into the ground holding their faces: the darts may not be enough to kill them, but the lethal poisons they were coated with would soon finish the job. A split-second later a huge ball of fire fizzed past the right of his unit, erupting in a massive explosion as it reached the opposing line, distributing green body parts far and wide. The screams of the wounded were drowned out by the

baying roar of their fellow orcs, but not for long; they were quickly trampled into the ground by those behind.

As the centers of the lines came together, Chikuaq saw the bent and broken bodies of massive orcs being flung like ragdolls from the horned head of the ankylodon. The ghekkotah were faring a little worse against the superior physical might of the orcs. Although they were able to dart between legs and stab rapidly in all directions, their front rank had been all but crushed under steel-capped boots.

Facing forwards once more he judged the distance still remaining: fifty yards, forty yards, thirty-five. At thirty he started to break into a run, his regiment still close either side but eerily silent save for the soft rumbling of footfall. Twenty-five yards. Running faster, the rumbling crescendoed, with a few of the more eager letting out angry hisses. And at twenty, all hell broke loose. His regiment erupted into a frenzy of rasping shrieks and hisses and bolted forwards as fast as they could. Sprinting with only a couple of yards to go, Chikuaq raised his flaming blade, screamed one last hiss and leapt into the raging torrent.

Landing solidly on both feet he threw two swift, downward swipes, one to the right, one to the left, catching the necks of both orcs immediately in front of him. Green-black blood oozed from the gaping wounds as they collapsed to the ground. Seeing a blade coming down at him from the right he parried, and then quickly reacted to deflect an axe being thrust like a sword by the orc behind those he had just felled. Trusting the regiment around him to deal with the attacker to his right Chikuaq lunged forwards and raised his sword parallel to the ground to block the axe that was now being brought down with almighty force at his head. The clash of the two weapons coming together caused a shower of fiery sparks from the flaming magmite steel. This unexpected burst caused the orc to falter for a split-second, giving Chikuaq time to grab the axe where the head was attached, pull it to the side and thrust his sword deep into the abomination's chest. From previous battles, Chikuaq knew the physical fortitude of his opponents. Even removing limbs would be highly unlikely to slow down an orc so each slash and thrust had to be aimed at killing in one blow. As he kicked the massive body of the dead orc off his blade a huge, steel-plated fist swung from the left and connected with Chikuaq's jaw. Stumbling into the salamander to his right, he saw an axe following

fast behind the fist. Being off balance he could not raise his sword in time, but a salamander jumped into the breach to block with his shield. This rash defense of the unit's leader cost the salamander dearly as the axe of another orc lodged itself deep into the warrior's right shoulder. Unable to maintain grip on his weapon, and with only a shield to defend himself, the disarmed salamander quickly fell prey to a flurry of blows.

By the time Chikuaq had steadied, he found himself in the second row of his regiment. He used the momentary respite to assess how the rest of the army was faring. The ghekkotah had taken heavy losses, but the ankylodon was still going strong. In most situations surrounding a beast was the surest way to take it down, but ankylodons were very much an exception to this rule. If an opponent was able to avoid being gored by the horns at the front, they then faced being trampled under huge, crushing feet. If this second danger was avoided, they finally faced a muscular tail, tipped with a heavy lump of bone decorated with yet more spiky protrusions which the beast could swing with deadly accuracy. Chikuaq could see orcs piling in to attack the animal but very few were living long enough to strike. The ones that did were struggling to draw blood from the thick skin and were not standing long enough for a second attempt. The unbloodeds had moved through the ghekkotah and seemed to be holding the orc line admirably: if the battle went well he could see Melathaq promoting some of their number to full warrior status. The mage priest, careful to avoid friendly fire, was focusing his spells towards the trolls now starting to lope with increasing speed towards the swirling melee. Two fewer were standing than Chikuaq had counted at the start of the battle, and as he looked another fireball ripped through the air, striking a third directly in the chest. The force of the explosion threw the monster backwards, the entire front of its lifeless corpse a melted mess of burnt flesh.

A salamander fell to the ground, but Chikuaq did not move to fight the orc now facing him. Like a cat not knowing what to do until the mouse runs, even the orc paused in confusion. Heavy, dull thudding crescendoed into an earthquake. With a dawning realization of the cause, the orc slowly closed its eyes in acceptance of its fate. The troll let out a sound like a bellowed retch and burst through the orc ranks, crushing the solemn orc's skull sideways with a wild swing of its crude weapon. With its free hand, it

grabbed a salamander's neck and yanked. Wrapping its enormous, salivating mouth around the snout, it bit down hard with green, rotten teeth, wrenching broken flesh, teeth and bone free from their owner. It surged forwards, swinging its weapon at Chikuaq who was only just able to dodge. His warriors were palpably nervous, retreating slowly from the unhinged monster. Even the orcs had ceased their pressing attack, knowing that they were just as likely to receive a boulder to the face as any salamander if they came too close. Realizing the onslaught could quickly turn into a rout, Chikuaq readied himself, raised his sword and charged. A handful of his warriors followed his example and rushed forwards. The small boulder swung in a low arc, pulverizing two of them. Chikuaq and the remaining few slashed and hacked at the beast. Blood sprayed in all directions from its limbs but still it swung them, its fist sending another salamander sprawling. An axe bit into side of the troll's knee. Stumbling and yowling, the boulder came back in an instantly reply, smashing through the salamander's shield and hurling the wielder to the floor. Losing itself in a rage, the troll started pounding the limp body like a cook tenderizing meat with a mallet. Horrified by what was happening before him, it took Chikuaq a few seconds to react. Finally realizing that this was his chance, he darted behind the distracted troll and thrust his sword below the ribs and upwards towards the heart. It took the dumb animal a few seconds to understand what had happened. At first it tried to reach behind it's back to claw at the hilt. Then, gradually, it started to slow, tottering slightly as its arms lazily carried on in their objective. Finally, the mouth gurgled, the eyes rolled back, and the troll's face hit the ground.

Unable to yank the now extinguished sword from the body, Chikuaq rolled, deftly selecting the axe of a fallen comrade before leaping back to his feet. With the threat of the troll gone he had expected to find orcs swarming around him, but instead they were frantically shuffling backwards, hiding behind each other's shields. With the enemy wavering and on the brink of fleeing, Chikuaq bellowed his order without having to think.

"Charge!"

As he leant forward to start his run his mind punched him in the gut with the realization that something was wrong. The orcs had not fared so badly that they should be running yet. And their

faces. However gnarled and hard to read they were, they were not the faces of the fearful or frightened. What was meant to be a run turned into a few fallen steps as he stared at the front rank of orcs, looking for clues. While most of his unit noticed Chikuaq's hesitance, checked their advance and stood ready, a couple of quicker salamanders raced ahead and were swiftly hacked down. A large orc wearing a tattered kepi broke into a wide grin as his blood red eyes met Chikuaq's. Having opened a gap of about thirty feet, the orcs halted and Chikuaq noticed an odd sound coming from his left. Terror clenched his throat as three boar-pulled chariots exploded over the crest of a small ridge to their left and came hurtling down. The clattering, squealing contraptions bristled with jagged steel, the wheels transforming some of the protrusions into mincing machines. In an instant, the chariots were upon them. Body parts flew, chaos and blood spewing in all directions. Wails of agony falsettoed over a chorus hysterical screams as his regiment started to flee from the onslaught. One of the chariots churned past Chikuaq, an orc rider following through with a mace. As the whirling spikes mangled themselves into his leg, the mace crunched into his shoulder. Incapacitated by pain, he dropped to the ground. Shaking violently as he struggled to get back up, he collapsed again immediately as his left leg gave way beneath him. Still refusing to give up, Chikuaq tried to roll on to his back by pushing with the one arm still working, but his quivering limb could not shift the weight of his body. Slumping back down he wallowed in pools of muddied earth and blood. 'Why here?', he thought as the pain started to fade like a distant memory, 'I want to go home'. His eyes became heavy, the world started to slow, and then there was nothing.

The War Journal of Sister Superior Augusta

Battles in the Star-Struck City
by Alex Younger

"You call them Star-Metal, because they are shiny. You lack both Knowledge and Imagination. We know what they really are; after all, we were there when they were forged, and when they were shattered."

Ravings from a Nightmare

Prologue

Sister Superior Augusta stood in full armor in front of Paladin Captain Julius' desk. She was used to living in her armor, but she had been standing in the same spot, at attention, without moving for at least ten minutes. The light from the large stained glass window to her left was warm, and one particularly resilient drop of sweat was moving glacially down the back of her knee. She flexed her leg just enough to crush the bead of sweat against her leather greaves, and ease the infernal tickling. Her movement was slight, but Julius noticed, and held up one finger on his right hand without looking up. It was as if he was saying, "Just a minute more." It was a petty punishment, and it galled her how well it worked. It made her feel that being called to his office for a reprimand was somehow wasting his precious time, and that she was less important than the parchment piled on his desk.

A short eternity later, Julius set aside the parchment he was reading, and steepled his fingers. He started to speak, then squeezed his eyes shut. Augusta took a minute to look at him before the storm broke. Though his neatly trimmed beard was still black, there was more salt than pepper in his short-cropped hair. There were more lines around his eyes than she remembered, and he looked tired as if he hadn't slept in days. Given the depth of the reports scattered across his desk, she wondered how many days it had been.

"The *entire* town?" he asked finally. His tone was passive, almost disinterested, but the stress on the word 'entire' betrayed hidden depths of anger.

"Yes Sir," she replied in a tight, controlled tone while looking straight ahead, six inches above the Paladin Captain's head. Julius

took a single breath, in long through his mouth, and then quickly out through his nose, just short of snorting.

“Can you,” he said calmly, as if her entire career wasn’t held over the fire and crisping at the edges, “explain to me why you decided to pacify the entire town with fire and steel?”

“Well Sir, in my report…” she began in the same professional tone.”

He cut her off by slamming his armored fist into his desk hard enough to leave divots from the knuckles of his gauntlet. He stood at the same time, spreading his hands wide on his desk, and leaning forward in what was an admittedly impressive intimidating stance. “I’ve read the night-blessed report!” He shouted.

She felt somehow relieved that he was finally shouting. The tension behind his previous cold demeanor had been worse. Being shouted at was normal, almost cathartic.

“I’ve read all the reports. I’ve interviewed your team. Do you know what they said?” The question was obviously not a question. She stood in silence while he angrily stirred the storm of papers on his desk, and ripped out the ones he wanted. “Aquila says, and I quote, ‘the fire was pretty’. Camilla said nothing at all, just stared at the floor until I dismissed her. Claudia suggested that it will be ok because, ‘we tried to only burn the guilty ones’ and, ‘the Shining Ones will sort them out’. And Fausta,” he stopped to shake a blank piece of parchment in Augusta’s face, “stole my night-blessed quill and I didn’t notice until she had left the briefing!”

“They are very loyal, Sir.” Augusta said once he stopped to take a breath.

“Loyal to you,” Julius said quietly in a tone composed entirely out of very cold steel, “rather than loyal to the Church.”

Augusta had no response, because he was probably right. She just waited through the awkward silence until he continued.

“I sent you to scout the town, and verify rumors of an Abyssal Cult.” His voice remained cold.

Augusta nodded once sharply and said, “the rumors were true, Sir.”

“And,” Julius continued as if she hadn’t spoken at all, “you decided rather than return with that information as you had been ordered, to burn the entire town, and cut down the survivors as they fled? How,” his voice rose sharply, “did you even manage to burn an entire town in one night?!”

“It was a very small town, more of a hamlet, Sir.” She tried, and failed, to keep the corner of her mouth from turning up.

Julius slammed the desk again, hard enough that it jumped, and his reports slid perilously close to the edges, “This is not a joke!” He shouted. “Arch-Deacon Flavius’ sister’s son was in that town.”

Augusta’s tone abruptly became as cold as ice, “then he was a…”

Julius’ right index finger was abruptly in her face, “don’t finish that sentence.”

“Even if it’s the truth?” Augusta asked in a tone that would kill spring flowers.

“Especially if it’s the truth!” Julius’ shoulders were shaking with the force of his fury. He took several deep breaths before continuing. “Even,” he put his finger inches from her nose again, “even if what you say is true, then he’s already been purified by flame, and therefore returned to a state of innocence.” He sat back down and sighed, seeming to deflate. “Tell me there was at least armed resistance.”

Augusta’s stiff posture relaxed enough for her to look directly at Julius for the first time, “the rites were being led by an Abyssal Dwarf. This was the real thing. They were using…” she shuddered in spite of herself, “Rat-kin to tunnel beneath the buildings, and connect all of them to their profaned temple. When we discovered their temple, and the sacrifices,” her hands curled into fists at her sides remembering what they had found in the nave of the temple, “the cultists attacked. We killed most of them, but the Dark Dwarf, and the Rat-Kin, retreated into the tunnels. We collapsed the

entrance, and burned the temple both to purify it, and to cut off their escape. Something down in the tunnels must have been very flammable; buildings across the hamlet went up like candles. We barely made it out with our riding cats."

"It would be easier on me if you hadn't."

Augusta's face and heart fell. She knew she was a trial to her superiors, but she truly acted out of faith. The damage an Abyssal Cult could do in the heart of Basilea was sickening. She'd been a member of the Basilean clergy her entire life, raised in a Church run orphanage, and then later training and serving as a member of the Sisterhood. She'd never wanted to be anything else. If she was turned out, she had no idea where to go, or what to be.

Julius immediately raised his right hand, palm out to her, "Mea culpa, Sister. My weariness runs away with my tongue." He closed his eyes, and his lips moved in a silent prayer. "To the Abyss with politics," he said to himself once he was done, "my official finding," he said to Augusta, "is that you terminated the cult with an excess of zeal."

Augusta felt like a weight had been removed from her ribcage. She wouldn't have her emblem stripped from her, and be separated from her sisters and riding cat.

"There will be waves," Julius continued in a subdued tone, "and I can't protect you from all of them. I need to get you out of sight for a while. Maybe a long while." He shuffled the parchment scraps in front of him until he lost patience, and swept half of them onto the rug with a violent sweep of his arm. "There it is," he said with something combining surprise and weariness. He held the report out to Augusta. While she skimmed it, he said, "There are reports, that in the Infant Sea, a new island has formed. Or, an old one has floated back up, like a swollen corpse. If it is one of our cities lost during the Winter War, then the potential is limitless. I need a small team, comfortable with working without support or backup, to scout it."

Augusta smiled inwardly. This was perfect for her team. This was, in fact, what they trained for.

“We won’t be able to support you”, he continued more quickly, seeing her warm to the assignment, “We won’t even be able to acknowledge we sent you. Officially you will be a private company, loosely affiliated with the Basilean Church. If, and only if, you find proof linking this discovery with Primovantor, from before the Winter War, we will be able to send an official detachment, and establish an ancestral claim. I will expect missives, coded with one of the standard cyphers, to report your progress.”

“We won’t let you down, Sir.” Augusta was excited. There was no unit in the Military Arm of the Church better suited to operate in a hostile environment than her team. “Can we bring our riding cats?”

Julius nodded sharply, “I can give you your cats, your armor and hand weapons, as well as transportation to the island. That’s all. Anything else you need will have to be foraged or traded. You can wear your unit insignia, but no Church insignia.”

She nodded several times accepting the terms, already thinking about establishing contacts and supply routes. “When do we leave, Sir?”

He started writing out orders in a sloppy and hurried hand, “this afternoon,” he said, “and the sooner the better. Gather your team, draw your gear, and select your cats. Report to the wharf before High Tide, and commandeer a ship. Here is a promise of remuneration for the Captain.” He handed her the parchment after waving it in the air a few times to set the ink.

Augusta took the parchment, and snapped to attention. She brought her fist to her chest for a salute but stopped, puzzled by a raised eyebrow from Julius.

“As of this moment,” he said with a smile, “you are the Captain of a private company contracted to the Church of Basilea. You don’t have to salute me, as I am now your employer, not your commander.

She thought about this, then cocked her head to the side and smiled. She stepped forward and offered her arm to him. He

gripped her arm firmly halfway between her wrist and elbow. She gripped his in turn. “Walk in the shadow of their Wings, Julius” she said, her voice brimming over with mirth and excitement.

Julius looked her in the eye, and said, “and you as well, Augusta.”

Augusta straightened, and turned on her heel, heading for the barracks, but stopped in the doorway. “Did you say the wharf, Si—uh, Julius?”

Julius smiled wickedly, “yes, I did in fact.”

The color drained from her face, “but you know how the cats react to a sea voyage.”

In a falsely innocent tone Julius said, “But how else do you reach an island, Augusta?” He waited a minute, seeing her face look more and more like curdled milk, and finally said, “You didn’t think you were getting away without punishment did you?”

Your reflection blocks your view through a mirror. It moves when you move, so that you can never see behind it. Have you ever asked yourself, is it protecting you from something? Or hiding something from you?

Whispers in an Empty Room

Chapter 1

Three days aboard this scow pretending to be a merchant vessel. Just three days, and she’d already broken the first mate’s hand for grabbing what no man had a right to. She’d polished her armor and short sword 5 times, but already saw spots of rust growing again. The never-ending sound of the waves made her want to deafen herself, and the smell of the crew made her gag worse than the rocking motion of the deck. Seriously, how could you live and work surrounded by water, yet never bathe? The crew talked fondly of month long voyages to exotic lands. She didn’t know how they did it. She’d have killed the crew, and wrecked the boat, within a week just for a chance to stand on dry land again.

“Miss Augusta,” the voice of the Captain was falsely cheery, another

nail in his fondly imagined coffin. She rankled at the familiarity of being called “Miss”. She could no longer be called “Sister Superior”, despite the other Sisters slipping, and calling her by her old title. Technically, she was Captain of a private company, but a ship could only have one Captain, so until this interminable voyage was over, she was simply “Miss”. “Just the woman I wanted to see.”

No one should be that happy while bobbing up and down on this blue-green hell. He ambled up to her, and stood way too close to where she was leaning on the rail. She had been deciding whether it was worth leaning over the rail to throw up, the combination of the Captain’s breath and unique ‘eau de unwashed man’ quickly made her mind up for her. He politely waited until she was done retching, and had a chance to wipe her mouth. “Miss Augusta,” he began, and she wondered if he used the term out of politeness, or because he knew how much it bothered her, “I seem to be missing some things from my cabin.”

She waited for him to continue, but he seemed content to stand there in the sun and spray, and let her draw her own conclusions. “Maybe you just misplaced them,” she said finally, trying to sound like a gruff and battle-worn veteran, but settling for not sounding like she’d just thrown up yesterday’s salted beef.

“Oh, no, no, Miss Augusta,” he said smiling, “on a ship everything has a place, and everything is in its place, except of course, my second-best compass and spy-glass.”

“Are you accusing me, or My Girls, of theft?” she asked tiredly, knowing that was exactly what he was doing.

“No, no, no,” he said jovially, waving his big callused hands in front of him, “I think maybe someone just borrowed them, from my locked cabin, and forgot to return them.” His smile never wavered, but something about it contrived to remind her that he, in fact, owned the only piece of real estate you could actually stand on for as far as the eye could see.

Augusta turned her back to him, placed both hands on the rail, and spent several long seconds focusing on speaking without vomiting. “You may be right, Captain. If you haven’t found them by the end

of the voyage, I will add them to the Letter of Remuneration, if that is acceptable to you." Fausta, she thought tiredly, do you even know how to work a compass?

"Yes, yes," the Captain said magnanimously, in the infuriating way he had of repeating himself. "The sea is beautiful in the morning, isn't' it?" He waved out over the railing at the white-capped misery she'd been avoiding looking at.

"Pardon me," she said hurriedly, trying, and failing, not to follow his hand out across the shifting horizon, "I need to check on my cat." She hurried to the stairwell, and down into the hold, trying to convince herself she wasn't running away.

If anything, the hold was more miserable than the deck. The smell hit her like an Orc's war club. It was a disturbing mix. Equal parts raw meat, cat musk, and the sour smell of vomit. She powered through it, and made her way to the riding cat stalls. One side of the hold had been hastily converted into stalls for the cats. The wooden enclosures were more to keep the cargo from sliding into them, than for keeping the cats contained. The hay, which had been fresh three days ago, had long since become a slimy, matted mess. She walked to the farthest enclosure, and slid down onto the filthy hay regardless of what it would do to her leather greaves. Friendship, after all, was much more important than vanity.

As soon as she settled down, the large cat lifted its head, and laid it in her lap. It looked more like a sick child than a sleek engine of destruction. When it lay its head down, its breath came out in a 'whuff' and it made a sound like a mewling kitten. She ran a hand down its sweaty flank, and murmured, "It's ok Koshka, almost done now." Whether it was her words, or her touch, he calmed. After a few minutes, he even broke out in a rumbling purr. It was technically against the stricture to name, or befriend, the riding cats. They were more wild than domestic, and even after decades of partnership, th4 Sisters were still the only ones that could ride them. More than one Paladin had been mauled thinking 'he'd be the one'. Unofficially, though, if you couldn't form a relationship with a riding cat, you couldn't ever be a true Lancer. And, Lancers were the 'true' Sisters.

The Sisters who were too scared of the cats, or just failed to form a bond, were forever relegated to cleaning and maintaining the chapels, or at best, performing missionary work in 'safe' areas. She'd known Koshka since he was a cub. She'd been a part of his training, hand-feeding him to build trust between them. He'd saved her life in battle, and would follow her into the Abyss itself, but he was still at heart, a cat. His moods were as changeable as the wind or the tide, and she had plenty of scratches to attest to that. He'd only been willing to board the ship, and enter the hold, at her coaxing. Over eight feet long, and over five hundred pounds, she'd seen him rip open armored Orcs easier than she could shuck an oyster.

She ran a hand over the scar in his dark reddish fun from when he'd carried her five miles to safety with a Goblin javelin in his left shoulder. She had a matching scar just below her ribs, on the right side. She'd thought that they would both die that day, but his great heart pulled them both through.

Seeing him dizzy and sick, lying in the stinking hold of this rotten ship, was breaking her heart. Alone in the darkness, without anyone to see her, was the only place where she could let down her guard. She bent down, and put her face in Koshka's fur, where she could pretend the wetness on her cheeks was his sweat, rather than her tears. "Did I make the right decision?" she asked, quietly and completely to herself. The only answer was another of the cats hacking and spewing into the already dirty hay.

She wasn't sure how long she spent in the hold, petting Koshka and keeping his head out of the hay, but she'd heard the bell on deck ring once, so it had been at least an hour, or was it three? Who knew how sailors kept time? She was slowly preparing to work her way out from under Koshka's head, hopefully without disturbing him too much, when she heard soft footsteps on the stairwell. She scrubbed at her face quickly; she could never afford to appear weak, not even in front of her girls, and certainly not in front of those sailors.

The footsteps stopped at an earlier enclosure. One of her girls, then. She was happy she wasn't the only one checking on the cats. She was awkwardly unsure whether she should call out, to let the other girl know she was already down there, or to try and slip out

quickly. She hesitated. Before she made up her mind, she heard a quiet voice speaking. It was a voice she heard so rarely, that it took her a minute to place it. It was Camilla, who rarely, if ever, spoke to anyone but Claudia.

“Eat it silly,” the girl said, “it’s lemongrass, and it’ll help your tummy.” There was the sound of a large body moving through hay, and a few minutes later the sound of deep purring. “See isn’t that better? You’re going to like this new island once we get there. We’re going to go on adventures, and get to kill lots of bad monsters. Then, when we get back to Basilea, we’ll all get promoted, and I’ll finally be able to join the Sisters Hospitaller.”

Augusta didn’t know what shocked her more. That Camilla, who couldn’t talk to anyone, would talk so freely to her cat, or that the girl wanted to join the order to travelling healers. She knew the girl was right though. If this island really was a preserved Primovantor city, then it would make the career of not only her, but the entire team. This was no time for doubt, despite not wearing the familiar colors of the church. Their work was Holy work. Camilla’s speech had trailed off into quiet snores, so Augusta quietly slipped out from under Koshka, and headed up toward the deck. As she silently padded past Camilla, she stopped to observe her while she slept. She was leaned up against the wall of the riding cat enclosure, with her mouth open like she fell asleep mid-sentence.

Her curly golden hair framed her round face, and reminded Augusta just how young she and the other girls were. Her whole team, highly-trained fighters and dedicated to the Church, but all in their late teens. In another life, they’d still be discussing boys, and preparing for weddings, but here they were. On a ship, headed to what would most likely be, a warzone. Thinking back to when she was as young, and new to this life, as they were, made her feel much older than her 30 years.

She turned to head toward the stairwell, again, when she noticed that the girl was cradling a bound stack of vellum on her lap. The top leaf was half covered in an almost finished charcoal drawing of her riding cat, Calico. Most of the riding cats had a coat of either black or brown, shading to red. Camilla’s cat, however, had a coat that had patches of black, brown, and red, in a tortoise-shell pattern. Calico, the subject of the sleeping artist, looked healthier

than any of the other cats, and was batting the charcoal stick Camilla had dropped between its paws. Augusta deftly retrieved the charcoal stick before Calico could crush it or gnaw it to pieces, and tucked it safely into one of Camilla's belt pouches.

Augusta had no sooner than emerged into the light, when she heard voices shouting. She followed the commotion, and was not surprised to find Claudia sitting in the middle of whatever trouble was brewing. She, and five of the sailors, were sitting on barrels next to the main mast. Claudia looked out of place, but then she looked out of place anywhere. She was a head taller than any of the other girls, including Augusta, and insisted on exaggerating that by binding her ginger-colored hair into a rough topknot. She was stripped down in a way that, Augusta thought, bordered indecent.

Her chain shirt was nowhere to be seen, and the sleeves of her leather armor had been unlaced at the shoulders, and removed. Augusta knew it was hot in the sun, but imagine, baring her arms in front of sailors! The sailors were shouting at each other, and alternating between shoving and shooting dirty looks at a small and particularly weasel-faced one of their number. Augusta stalked up to them, wearing scowl number five. Her, 'I'm in charge here, and you're all guilty' look. "Claudia," she said, in what could politely be termed a growl, "what is going on here?"

Claudia looked up at her as if she was slightly hurt to be singled out, when all of this was obviously not her fault. "We are playing dice, Sister—uh, Captain."

Augusta tapped her foot impatiently, and rolled her hand, indicating Claudia should keep telling her version of the story, "and?"

"And, I noticed Billy here," Claudia stopped, and smiled at the small oily-looking sailor, as if remembering his name was a huge compliment she'd paid him, "uses a different set of dice than the rest of us use. I just asked him if he minded if I used his dice, rather than the normal set, because they seem luckier." Claudia shrugged, as if it was a completely reasonable suggestion, and that Billy was being completely unfair for resisting.

Augusta looked at the sailor in question. He was hunched up with his head tucked down between his shoulders, as if he expected someone to try to punch him in his ears at any moment. The knuckles on his right hand were white from how hard his fist was clenched around something.

“And then I noticed,” Claudia paused, and her hand darted out as quick as a snake. She grabbed Billy’s right wrist, and expertly applied an armored thumb to the tender nerves between the bones, just above the palm of his hand. Billy’s hand popped open like a triggered crossbow. Claudia’s other hand grabbed one of the die lying there. “I noticed,” She continued happily, “that his dice each had two sixes, rather than a one and a six.” She held the offending die up for Augusta’s inspection.

Augusta took the die gingerly, as if it were a scorpion that might sting at any moment. She turned it over several times, looking at it from every angle. It did, indeed, have six pips on top and on bottom, rather than the more traditional one on top, and six on bottom. Augusta made a point of touching it as little as possible, her thumb on one face and her index finger on the other, as she handed it back to Billy in plain view of the other sailors.

“I didn’t know they even made dice with more than one six!” Claudia said, as if she was discovering a new species of dice in the wild. “Think how often you’d win if you didn’t have to worry about rolling a one.”

Augusta didn’t honestly know whether Claudia realized how much worse Billy’s life was about to become, now that he’d been outed as a cheat. Either way, she did know when it was time to make a graceful exit. “Claudia,” she said, hoping to interrupt the girl’s train wreck of thought, “have you seen Fausta? I’m worried that she may be getting into trouble.”

Claudia’s mouth twisted into a knot for a second as she thought, “I think she went up toward the forecastle,” she said after a minute, “I’ll go with you, that girl is always starting trouble.” Claudia bounced up off her barrel, and almost danced toward the raised deck at the front of the ship. Augusta followed more slowly, her hand hovering near the hilt of her blade. Their footsteps were

echoed by staccato thumps and slaps behind them.

They found Fausta standing alone near the prow of the ship, trying on an odd hat with three corners and rolled edges. Before Augusta could say anything, Claudia spoke up, “Where’d you get the hat Fausta?”

Fausta’s almond shaped dark eyes narrowed to slits. If she had been a riding cat, she’d be hissing right now, Augusta thought.

“Found it.” Fausta said without hesitation, or a hint of defensiveness. Her voice was completely at odds with her posture.

“Augusta,” Claudia turned toward Augusta, her voice a whine, “Fausta has a hat that doesn’t belong to her.”

“It’s mine if I found it!” Fausta shouted back, squaring her feet and shoulders at Claudia.

Augusta knew from experience that, if she didn’t intervene, things would quickly escalate to hurt feeling, and then to a fight which would last for hours.

“Fausta, dear,” Augusta said gently, “I don’t think it fits.”

Fausta stopped glaring at Claudia, and looked down at the hat in her hands. She abruptly put it back on her head, then adjusted it, then adjusted it again. Like Augusta said, the hat didn’t sit properly. Her mass of naturally wavy jet black hair made the hat too small to sit comfortably on her head. Fausta snatched the hat off, and looked at it reproachfully, as if the hat was spiting her by being too small on purpose.

Augusta watched Fausta fight with the hat, trying to fight down her envy of Fausta’s beautiful hair. Augusta’s own hair was lank, and a dirty-water-blonde, that was more of a lack of personality than it was a color. She kept it cut short, so that it fit under a helmet, and never got in her way in a fight. The first time the Sister-at-Arms had thrown her to the ground using her flowing flocks, Augusta had learned the painful wages of the sin of vanity. Claudia opened her mouth to goad Fausta again, but Augusta put a hand on her arm,

silencing her before she said anything.

Finally, Fausta finished fiddling with the hat, and looked up at Augusta, “you’re right. It doesn’t fit.” She looked unsure of what to do, wanting advice, but not wanting to look weak enough to ask for advice.

“Would you put it back where you found it, please?” Augusta asked in a mild voice. “I’m sure whoever lost it is looking for it.”

Fausta smiled, nodded, and headed for the rear of the ship. Her movements were so quick, as to almost seem to be disjointed. She has a way of going from full stop to top speed, without any time in between.

Augusta leaned back against the rail, and watched Fausta go. She watched as Fausta sidled up to a sailor, sleeping in a coil of rope. Without waking him up, she set the hat gentle on his head, so that it shaded his eyes.

“What’s wrong with her?” Claudia asked, “You know, the whole stealing thing. I mean, that’s not normal.”

Augusta sighed, and closed her eyes. “She’s got a demon in her. Makes her steal, and then forget that she did it. She isn’t malicious, and she isn’t lying. She really thinks she finds her treasures.”

“I just don’t understand,” Claudia said with a pout.

Unbidden, Augusta’s mind rolled back ten years. She was standing guard, at the side gate of the chapel. Not the main gate, where the guards had a measure of pride, with their shining armor and crisp movements. She was guarding a small closed gate that was rarely used during services, much less three hours before dawn. She couldn’t remember who she’d offended to pull that duty, but she did remember that she deserved it. She was half asleep, when she felt a tug at her belt. Her reflexes from patrolling the market had her hand clasped around a tiny wrist before she consciously registered the tug.

Fully awake, she pulled the pickpocket around in front of her. The

girl was small, somewhere between 8 and 10 years old, but skinny as a rail. She was severely under dressed for the chill late autumn weather. Only an over-long tunic, not even shoes. Augusta thought it likely that the only reason she'd felt the slight tug on her belt was that the child was so cold. She was trembling like a leaf. "Were you trying to steal my purse?" Augusta asked the child sternly.

"W-wasn't doin-n-nuthin." The child stammered sulkily, staring at the ground.

Looking closely at the little girl, Augusta could just see beneath the pickpocket's cascading black hair and grime. The pickpocket's skin was a pretty olive color, and her eyes had a slightly almond shape. Features which were more common in the warmer southern country of Ophidia, than the relative north of the Golden Horn. "Where are you folks?" She asked more gently.

"Got no, f-f-fff," her chattering teeth betrayed her as she tried to speak, "just got me and me's all I need." She said, hooking her thumb at her chest in an attempt at bravado.

Augusta relaxed her grip just a little. A half-formed plan on how to calm and reassure the child came to her mind. As soon as she felt the iron grip relax, the girl flew into motion trying to escape. Her feet slid on the slick cobblestones, and she ended up hanging for a second from Augusta's grip. She looked more like a rag doll than a child. Weak, tired, and cold, it took her three times to get her numb feet under her to stand. Making her mind up suddenly, Augusta leaned her pike against the gate, and swept her arm behind the girl's legs.

As she lifted the child in her arms, she realized that the little girl weighed barely more than the rags she was wearing. She must have been starving for weeks. With her free arm, Augusta unlocked the gate she was guarding, and carried the girl into the warmth of the chapel.

The side door was a servant's entrance, so it was close to the kitchen. Augusta sat the girl down at the Chef's table, next to the banked hearth. Even with the fire down to coals, it was still much warmer than outside. The girl didn't so much sit at the table, as

collapse onto it. Augusta located a plate, found half a loaf of bread, and some cheese that had been left out for the guards to snack on during breaks in their rotation. She set this in front of the girl, and sat across from her at the table. Quick as a mouse, the girl snatched a piece of cheese, and hid it in her tunic.

“Go ahead,” Augusta said, “it’s all for you. Eat slowly though, or you’ll give yourself a tummy ache.”

Slowly and painfully, as if she expected to be hit any second, the girl reached out, and broke off a piece of bread. She froze there, with the bread in her hand, expecting Augusta to shout at her or take it back. When nothing happened, she took a bite, and then hesitantly, a second one. When nothing bad happened, she tore into the bread like a wild animal.

“Slowly, slowly,” Augusta said laughing, “If it’s been a while since you ate, the bread will swell up, and make you sick.”

The girl said nothing. She just stuffed bread into her mouth as if it might disappear at any minute.

“You know,” Augusta said conspiratorially, then sadly, “I lost my parents when I was little too.”

The girl looked up at her with a haunted look, “Whuf ha-en’d?” she said around a mouthful of bread.

“Cultists,” Augusta said with a little heat leaking into her voice, “Evil men took them away from me. The Church raised me after that. Made me strong. Taught me how to fight.”

While reaching for another piece of bread, the girl said softly, “ghouls are evil…” her voice rose at the end, like she was asking a question.

“Yes, they are.” Augusta said softly. Ophidia, she thought to herself. How did this child manage to escape, and make it this far? Rather than delve any further into bad memories, she asked, “What’s your name? Mines…”

“Augusta!” the sharp shout was louder than the small, frail woman in the doorway should be able to make. Sister Superior Irene was called, by Apprentices and Sisters alike, “Sister Iron” for her stiff posture and her unwavering commitment to the rules.

At the shout, the little girl whirled off the seat in an explosion of rags, and faced the severe woman in the door with a bread knife in her hand. Where had she gotten it? Augusta was certain she’d left that knife on the counter across the room. She hurried to place herself between the older woman and the girl.

“Your gate is unguarded,” Sister Iron said, “and your job is to keep the riff-raff out, not invite them in!” Her words had edges as sharp as any knife.

“This girl was freezing to death outside,” Augusta said firmly. “Without food and a fire, she may not have lived through the night.”

Sister Iron’s mouth formed into a straight line, lips pinched white, “be that as it may…”

Taking a chance, Augusta cut her off, “her parents were killed in a ghoul attack.” Interrupting a Senior Sister was never a safe option, but every member of the Militant Arm of the Church, Augusta included, had lost friends to undead attacks.

Sister Iron’s mouth relaxed into a frown, which was her default state.

“I’ll sponsor her,” Augusta said, quickly, on a whim.

Sister Iron scoffed, “you are in enough trouble as it is, young lady.”

“I’m still a Sister in good standing.” Augusta pointed out, “And, by the charter, any Sister in good standing can sponsor a child to the Academy.”

“I know the Charter, Augusta.” Sister Iron snapped.

Augusta let a hint of pleading into her voice, “Sister Superior Irene,

it was done for me when I was around her age. I don't know where I would be if not for the comforting embrace of the Church."

Sister Iron lowered her head, and was silent for a long time. Augusta suspected she was either counting backward, or saying a prayer. "Your heart," she said eventually in her clipped tones, "is in the right place, no matter where your attitude takes you. Come along then." She held her hand out to the girl.

Augusta stepped out from between them, and nodded to the little girl. The knife disappeared from her hand in a flash. I'll have to get that from her at some point, Augusta thought. Augusta knelt down, so that she was on level with the girl's scared stare. "What's your name?" she asked softly.

The girl just shook her head. Augusta wasn't sure if the girl meant she couldn't remember, or just didn't want to be that person anymore.

Augusta thought for a minute, and then said, "I'll call you Fausta, it means lucky." She smiled, and the girl smiled with her. "From now on, I think you are going to be a lucky little girl. Now, follow Sister Superior Irene. She'll show you to the barracks, and a bed of your own."

Fausta stepped forward, and put her hand into Sister Iron's. Hand in hand, they walked out of the kitchen. In the doorway, Sister Iron stopped, and looked over her shoulder, "Augusta, you know what sponsoring means. You are responsible for her behavior, and your record will reflect on her."

Feeling a chill deep in her gut at the new responsibility, Augusta just nodded, and headed back to the gate.

She came back to herself, standing on the forecastle of the ship. She shook her head to clear the cobwebs of memories, and said, "No, Claudia, you don't understand," she turned, and smiled at the girl to take away some of the sting, "but that's ok."

Claudia took the chastisement in stride. Not much fazed the girl. "When are we going to get to the island?" Claudia asked, some of

the whine creeping back into her tone. “It’s boring here, and these sailors stink.”

Augusta winced. Claudia had a voice that the Paladins said was, ‘destined for the drill field.’ Her whispers could carry across a room, not that Claudia ever whispered. Heads on deck were turning to observe the two women on the forecastle. “Claudia, what have I said about being too honest?”

Claudia managed to flounce in a way that would have looked flattering in a silk dress. “I know, but lying’s a sin, so telling the truth should be like the opposite of a sin. And anyway, maybe no one has ever told them about things like bathing and laundry.”

Inwardly, Augusta felt the same way, but knew that if she let Claudia go on, there would be trouble later. “They don’t carry enough fresh water to use it for bathing and laundry.”

Claudia rolled her eyes in a way that took in the sea surrounding them.

“You can’t wash your clothing in seawater,” Augusta explained, “The salt will leave them just as dirty and itchy in the bargain.”

“Fine,” admitted Claudia, “I’m just tired of being on this boat.”

“Ship,” corrected Augusta, “if it has a Captain, it’s a Ship. And a better person to ask than me would be Aquila, where is she at?”

“Where else?” Claudia asked, pointing up at the main mast.

Augusta craned her neck back, and looked. At the very top of the main mast, obscured by both the sun and rigging, was a tiny platform the sailors called ‘the crow’s nest’. Augusta shook her head, and said, “I should have guessed.”

She weighed whether it was worth asking the Captain how long out from the island they were, when Aquila called out, “land ho!” The call was taken up by several sailors after her shout.

Augusta’s breath caught in her throat, as a small figure leapt from

the crow's nest, and started getting bigger quickly. Aquila slid down the lines running from the mast to the sails, leaping from one just before it ran out or knotted, and grabbing another mid-flight. She looked carefree and happy, whooping as she descended. Augusta imagined one missed grab, or a line coming loose, but Aquila landed safely, with a flourish just in front of her.

"Sister uh Captain uh," Aquila stumbled over the new title that they were all were just getting used to.

Augusta just nodded, encouraging her to go on.

"I saw the island!" Aquila said breathlessly, and pointed over the railing of the ship.

Claudia shaded her eyes with one hand, and followed where Aquila was pointing, "I don't see anything."

"Neither do I," said the Captain.

Augusta jumped, surprised at his voice. For such a large man, he could move quickly and silently across the deck of his ship. "If Aquila says she sees it," she said quickly to cover her fright, "it's there. No one has eyes like Aquila."

It was nearly an hour before it was visible from the deck of the ship, and even then it was just a wavering black line on the horizon, but Augusta had never doubted. When Aquila saw something, it was always exactly what she saw, and exactly where she saw it. In the hours before they drew up to the island, Augusta had the girls busy getting the cats up on deck, and preparing their gear. She even found time for a quick kit inspection.

Claudia was first. She stood at attention, in full gear this time, her topknot just short enough that her peaked helm fit properly. She stood next to her riding cat, Mulciber. His orange hair was almost a match for hers. Normally he stood a hand taller than the other cats, which was good, or else Claudia's feet would have drug the ground in the stirrups. Today though, he was lying on one side on the deck, looking like he might be sick at any moment.

Augusta walked slowly around the two of them, thoroughly inspecting their gear. The tack on the riding cat was a mess, but it was the best that could be expected in the circumstances. Claudia's gear though, there was no excuse. Coming back around in front, Augusta drew herself up to attention, and put on scowl number two. 'I expected better'. "When was the last time you cleaned and oiled your chain shirt?"

Claudia answered quickly and confidently, "yesterday, Ma'am." Then under the weight of Augusta's stare, she went on more quietly, and much less confidently, "or maybe the day before."

"Two days in sea air without cleaning or oiling?" Augusta said with disgust dripping from her words. Without looking down, she pointed at an orange line on the left side of Claudia's chain shirt. "Do you know what this is?"

Claudia said, "Rust, Ma'am." She said it as a statement, but her tone was that of a question.

Augusta turned her head slightly, and shouted at the rest of her team, "What is rust?"

"Weakness, Ma'am!" They shouted back in unison.

"What is rust?" she shouted, louder.

"Weakness, Ma'am!" They shouted back at the top of their lungs.

Turning back to Claudia, she said, "Rust is where your chain shirt breaks when the blade bites. Rust is a disease that spreads, link by link, to infect your entire kit. Rust, Claudia, is what kills you!" She started off at an even tone, getting louder and louder with each sentence. She was shouting at the end. "Two weeks kitchen duty, cooking, and cleanup," she said firmly, "and you'll present your chain shirt every night before first watch to prove you are keeping your gear in fighting order."

Camilla was next. Augusta walked around her, and found nothing wrong. Calico stood by her side, in the fighting cat version of

attention. The cat's tack was as well looked after as Camilla's own gear. When she came around in front, she just nodded at Camilla, who stood a little straighter at the acknowledgement. Augusta knew that it was likely Camilla would end up oiling and cleaning Claudia's chain shirt, but cooking, and then cleaning up, wouldn't leave Claudia much time to do it on her own. The important part was that the work got done, so she didn't say anything.

Aquila was after Camilla. Her kit was non-standard, but Augusta had accepted long ago that if the changes weren't approved, Aquila would make the changes anyway, and just accept the punishment. She wore no chain shirt, and her metal backed gauntlets had been exchanged for more flexible leather gloves. Likewise, her helm was a lighter hardened leather than the metal peaked helms they had been issued. Rather than the heavy two-handed flails most Sisters preferred, Aquila had a whip coiled on one hip. From her shoulder, to the opposite hip, she had coils of light climbing rope, which ended in a three-tined hook.

Peregrinatus, her cat, was as slim boned female with a sandy-brown coat. At the best of times, she didn't measure up to the other cats. Smaller, and less, aggressive, she seemed to fade into the background. Sick, and lolling on the deck, she looked worse than normal. Her tack, though, was clean and properly attached. Augusta found nothing to comment on, and gave Aquila the same tight nod she'd given Camilla.

Fausta was last. If anything, her gear was more immaculate than the others. Her chain shirt was not oiled. It was blackened with boot-shine. In addition to her two-handed flail, she had a knife at her belt, and in the cuff of her boot. Her cat, Noctifer, was a big male with deep black fur. Normally, he was aggressive to the point that he was difficult to keep still during an inspection. Today, he lay on his side, barely moving. The issue, as always with Fausta, wasn't the condition of her gear, it was the additions. "Fausta," Augusta asked, "what is that?" She pointed to a large spike with a wrapped rope handle strapped to the side of Noctifer's saddle.

"Marlin-pike, Ma'am" Fausta said.

"I don't think we'll have time for deep-sea fishing, Fausta. You

should give it to one of these sailors who can get better use out of it."

"Yes, Ma'am," Fausta said.

With the inspection finished, she marched back to the front and center of her team. "After you are dismissed," she began in her best parade ground voice, which was about equal to Claudia's inside voice, "Camilla," she looked directly at the quiet girl.

Camilla 'eeped' in response.

"You have something to help reduce nausea in the riding cats. You will distribute it to the other cats." She made it a statement, not a question, so Camilla didn't have to respond.

"You will all standby, and prepare to disembark. Dismissed." They all stayed in place, but relaxed rather than at attention. All, except for Camilla, who dug in her saddlebags for lemongrass. As she was coaxing the cats to eat, she kept looking over her shoulder at Claudia. She finally got Claudia's attention, who had been studying the orange links in her chain shirt, and looking anywhere but at Augusta.

Camilla and Claudia shared a look for a minute, and then Claudia said, "Captain, Camilla wants to know how you knew about the lemongrass."

Augusta replied to Claudia while looking at Camilla, "I'm the Captain. I just know."

Once the cats were dosed with the lemongrass, and laying more peacefully, Augusta brought Aquila over to the rail and said, "Tell me what you see."

Aquila looked at the island for several minutes, and finally said, "There is something, or someone, on the docks. They are staying mostly behind the ruins and walls, but occasionally, a head pops up."

"That's what I was afraid of," Said Augusta quietly.

“What is it?” Aquila asked, even though she could see further and better than Augusta.
“It’s an ambush,” Augusta’s voice was all steel. “Captain,” she shouted. When he turned, she continued, “I recommend you put on more sail.”

“No, no, woman,” The Captain shouted back, “we need to slow down before we stop. Reef the sail men!”

“Captain!” Augusta shouted back sharp enough that the sailors stopped their tasks, “the wharf is contested. You will not be stopping or slowing. If you wish to protect your men, you will put every scrap of sail into the wind, and give us all the speed you can. We will disembark at speed.”

“Crazy woman, you are crazy!” The Captain laughed as he spoke, “Even on those magnificent cats, you cannot fly!”

Augusta stared him directly in the eye, and without a hint of a smile replied, “Says who?”

The ship flew toward the tumbled pilings of the ruined dock faster than was wise. At the last minute, the Captain threw all of his weight onto the wheel, and the vessel broke toward portside, nearly lying over in the water. With a fierce war cry, Augusta led the charge up the inclined deck. The cats never slowed, flowing up the wooden hill, then gathering themselves at the railing, and finally leaping for the sky. They came down hard on the algae slick stones, claws scrabbling as they slid toward the edge and the frothing sea. Noctifer slid the farthest, his back paws slipping off the pier, and nearly dunking both himself and Fausta. Crossbows twanged, and bolts hissed and screeched as they stuck the stones before and behind them.

One struck Augusta in the shoulder, but she rolled her shoulder back at the last moment, twisting in the saddle. The bolt cut a furrow in the leather of her pauldron, and punched its way through her cloak, rather than through her shoulder. She spurred Koshka forward, and quickly flashed two fingers to her right, and then two to her left. The girls behind her split into two teams, and rushed

forward after her to the safety of the seawall.

They ended up on two sides of the road leading deeper into the docks, just like Augusta had ordered. Behind her were Camilla and Claudia, on the other side were Augusta and Fausta. Augusta took a minute to survey the battlefield. The crossbow bolts were coming from ruins further inside the docks. They had the square look of worked stone, but the roofs and support beams had long since rotted away leaving them open to the elements. The straight streets gave the archers clear lines of sight, as well as a good path of retreat. With their backs to the sea, and the opposition holding fortified positions, they were in the worst position possible. The only tactical option Augusta could see was to sneak along the seawall, keeping in cover, until they could try to rush around to the side, and pin their enemies against the churning ocean…

“I see one!” shouted Fausta charging. “No!” Shouted Augusta, but Fausta was already leaning forward and low over Noctifer’s shoulders, and halfway into the road and the crossbowmen’s line of sight. Aquila caught Augusta’s eye for a second that seemed to stretch, sticky-slow, longer than it should. Augusta nodded in slow motion. Aquila put her heels in, and Peregrinatus flew forward, time catching up suddenly. “Charge!” Augusta shouted to the two girls in front of her, parade ground voice cutting through the shouts of the hidden men and howls of bloodthirsty battle panthers.

Claudia and Camilla Charged forward across the road, their path cutting across the space that Fausta and Aquila had just vacated. They swapped sides of the road as they charged, creating an ‘x’ as both sides charged at the waiting Crossbowmen they could barely see. Augusta came hard on their heels, wondering how she could salvage a battle started so badly.

In the lead, Fausta barreled past a crouched Crossbowman, and into a group of three men dressed in rags, holding broken knives and clubs. Noctifer pounced on the first, and bore him to the ground. The other two hesitated only a minute before closing with her, flailing at her with their makeshift weapons.

Behind her, Aquila saw the Crossbowman she’d passed turn and take aim. She gave a fierce, high-pitched cry to Peregrinatus, who

immediately turned and leapt the waist-high pile of rocks the Crossbowman was sheltering behind. The leap brought them close enough to spoil his shot, which struck the cobbles a foot away from him, spraying stone chips, but not close enough for them to strike him.

On the other side of the road, two men quailed before the force of Claudia's war cry. She struck them in a way that only a combined half-ton of warrior, bloodthirsty battle-mad panther, and armor can. Her short sword took one of the men in his right arm, spinning him, and knocking him down as she turned to deal with the other. Camilla saw the first man fall. Calico leapt on him, claws and fangs scrabbling at his armor, and trying to reach his protected throat. Camilla knew that one short, sharp stroke would end him, but the thought of killing, even in the thick of battle, bothered her. She hesitated. Augusta, behind her, saw the hesitation, and spurred Koshka forward faster. But, she knew that she'd be too late. The man on the ground still had his crossbow cocked and ready. When Camilla froze, he didn't. He brought his crossbow across his body, and fired.

His angle wasn't good, and the hood of her cloak helped mask the actual position of her head. So, rather than plunging into her eye, the bolt struck her right temple, glancing off of her steel cap. The blow was strong enough to knock her from the back of Calico, where she lay in the street, unmoving. Seeing her sister-in-arms fall, Claudia gave a great bellow, and urged Mulciber sideways where they could stand over Camilla's body. She took a blow from the other man, who had dropped his empty crossbow, and drawn a club. She threw up her left arm to block his blow, taking it rather than allowing it to crush Camilla, who could not defend herself.

Augusta swept in like the cold wind before a storm. Koshka leapt on the fallen man, his forepaws finding a grip on the man's shoulders, while his rear paws kicked down and back, shredding through ragged leather armor as well as the stomach and thighs beneath it. At the same time, Augusta leaned forward to compensate for the angle, and form perfect, put her short sword through the left eye of the man fighting Claudia. On the ground, Camilla groaned, and put a hand to her temple. "That's how you do it girls!" shouted Augusta with glee, as she whipped Koshka around to face the group Fausta had charged.

The first man Fausta had struck was down, being mauled by Noctifer, but the other two had pulled Fausta from her saddle, and were laying into her with both weapons and boots. Fausta still had her weapon up, guarding her face, but she was fading fast. “Fausta!” Augusta shouted as Koshka sprinted, “you do not have permission to die! Get up!” Fausta only grunted in response, but managed to stab one of the men in the thigh, forcing him to pull back, and giving her room to gather herself.

Augusta spared a glance for Aquila as they breezed past her and the Crossbowman. Aquila had a firm grip on the crossbow, so he couldn’t reload, and Peregrinatus had the man down on the ground. Turning her attention to the fight before her, Augusta scrutinized the closest man. He was wearing a hat like what a Ship’s Captain would wear, but notched, stained, and bereft of the feathers and embroidery. He might still lead this group of pirates, but he had fallen far from “Captain”. Koshka put a shoulder into his chest at the same moment Augusta’s short sword creased his face.

He fell screaming, which distracted the man standing over Fausta. He had one hand holding pressure on the wound in his thigh, which means he couldn’t offer much of a defense when Fausta leapt up and stabbed him repeatedly in the chest and neck. When he fell, Augusta took a deep breath and looked around. The noise of Aquila’s fight with the crossbowman had finished, which she took as a good sign. The rest of the pirates were down, except for a lone Crossbowman, who, seeing the rest of his band fall, dropped his crossbow and ran. Growling like her cat, Fausta rolled into Noctifer’s saddle, and took off after him. “Damn it, Fausta!” Augusta shouted, and hurried to follow.

The fight ended faster than she could reach them. Much faster than a human on foot, Noctifer caught the fleeing pirate’s right arm in his jaws. He hadn’t even hit the ground by the time Fausta had a knife into his unarmored back. Seeing that Fausta was fine, Augusta reined in, and turned Koshka back to the other girls. Camilla was mounted again, though she was holding her head, and trying to staunch the blood running down the side of her face. Claudia still looked furious, but had run out of people to kill. Aquila was seated, calm and motionless, ignoring the carnage and gore around her. Fausta rode back to the group, carrying a cloth sack, “Look what he

had!" she said excitedly, holding the open sack out in front of her.

Inside were two chunks of metal. Both were flat and smooth on one side, but jagged on the rest, as if they had been part of a larger sheet that had been shattered. Augusta picked one up, and felt a hum as if they metal was vibrating. The smooth side was reflective. She could see her face, but rather than the sky behind her, she saw stars. She looked up to make sure their fight hadn't somehow lasted into the night, but the sun was still shining. Looking back at the chunk of metal again, she saw her face reflected, framed by a starry night sky. She quickly dropped the chunk back into the bag, and tied the mouth shut. "Magic," she said gruffly, "can't trust it."

"Can we keep them?" asked Fausta, almost like a little girl. "They are the only thing of value they had." Augusta tried, and failed, to contain a shudder. Robbing the dead was dishonorable, but how else were they to supply themselves in a deserted city? "Yes," she said finally, "they might be worth something."

They turned toward the deeper city, riding slowly, and keeping a close eye out for movement. Camilla's head hung as she crouched over her saddle, and Claudia rode close beside her to catch her if she fell again. Aquila's eyes strayed to the structures around them, which grew taller and taller as they proceeded into the city. Fausta and Noctifer roamed from side to side, looking in piles of trash, finding nothing, and growing bored. Finally, they emerged from an alley, and Augusta stopped in wonder. Before them was a large building which, despite it's time spent under the sea, was obviously a cathedral. "This is it girls," she said wearily, but also strangely satisfied, "this is where we make our camp."

Paladin Captain Julius,

We have established a camp on the newly resurfaced isle of Casa-Omnicidi. The docks were held by pirates, but we pushed through. Camilla hesitated to strike down a fallen pirate, and was wounded as a consequence. She has recovered fully, and now understands the price of both hesitation and mercy in battle.

Claudia blames herself for Camilla's wound, as ridiculous as that sounds, but it has provided her the motivation to double her combat

training. Fausta…remains Fausta. Her skill and enthusiasm at looting seems wrong for a soldier of faith, but in character for our current role as mercenaries.

The Pirates were carrying a strange metal we are calling Star-Metal. It is as hard as steel, but has some magical qualities we have yet to fully understand. When you look upon it, you see a starry sky reflected, no matter the time of day. We have secured two pieces so far, in case it has value.

We found an ancient Cathedral to base ourselves out of. Despite ages beneath the waves, some of the statues are recognizable as our venerated Shining Ones. The others, I don't pay close attention to, as I am secure in my faith. On finding this Cathedral, in the main sanctuary, we found amidst the carnage and wreckage the pulpit lectern virtually untouched. Rest atop it; in a single beam of light, was a shining ring. Taking it as a sign from the Shining Ones, I am wearing it even now. This small miracle fills me with courage and purpose. I am more confident now than ever, and my faith, voice, and arm have never been stronger.

In Faith,

Sister Superior Augusta

Guardians of the Sea

by Donn Turner

Although Kerith was, by most standards, a grown man, he was still young for a Kindred. He had seen 30 summers, and was already accomplished with both the bow and spear. He had even spent a season on the waves, as an apprentice on a small trading vessel. These accomplishments might be considered noteworthy for other, less sophisticated, races. But, for a youth from Therennia Adar, Kerith had just begun his story.

As a terrible war raged between anxiety and excitement within his core, Kerith paused, took a deep calming breath, and entered the barracks. He had dreamed of this moment all of his life. In fact, he could not remember wanting anything else. To be on the open waves. To strike like the lightning. To be one of the Guard.

Overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the busy space, Kerith paused, blocking the doorway. It was even better than he had imagined. Beautiful suits of armor were displayed along each wall. Next to the armor stands were racks that proudly displayed trusted spears and bows. The smell of exotic oils, sea salt, and exertion only added to the ambiance. Despite his best efforts, Kerith could not restrain himself. He smiled.

“Either come in, or be about your day, young one.” The grizzled voice broke through Kerith’s elation.

“I…I’m…forgive me, my lord. I am Kerith.” he struggled.

“…yes…yes, I’ve been expecting you.” the stranger said after a brief pause.

“I was told to report to this barracks, in order to start…”

“I know why you’re here, boy.” the stranger interrupted.

“…I…I see. Have…have I done something to offend you, sir?” Kerith asked, slightly confused.

"…Come here. Let me look at you." the stranger answered in reply.

Kerith recovered, and moved to stand proudly before the stranger. He was not at all what Kerith had been expecting. The man was obviously far older than Kerith, and had a rough manner. It was difficult to avoid staring at the scar that ran down the right side of his face.

The stranger was obviously appraising Kerith, looking at him from head to foot. Kerith pushed out his chest, standing as tall as he could, in reply. The stranger just looked at Kerith, disapprovingly.

"How old are you, boy?" the stranger asked.

"I have seen 30 summers, sir!" Kerith replied.

"That all?" the stranger retorted.

"Sir, I have completed the trials, and I am here to begin my…" Kerith started.

The stranger interrupted Kerith by grabbing his hands. The stranger turned them upwards, and looked at Kerith's palms. The look of disapproval was easy to read on his features.

"This isn't a game, boy." the stranger stated.

"I know that, sir! To serve in the Guard…" Kerith began.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. To serve in the Guard is the highest honor." the stranger interrupted.

The stranger let go of Kerith's hands, and just stared at the youth. For what seemed like an eternity, the pair stood in silence. Finally, the stranger let out a long sigh, and then pursed his lips.

"My name is Theodinel, and I am the Sergeant-at-arms of the Taranath. It is my duty to ensure that all hands are ready to sail at a moment's notice. It is not a duty that I cherish, for I have seen too many walk through that door, never to return." the stranger stated.

“I will not disappoint you, Sergeant!” Kerith stated loudly.

“I know. That’s what they said too.” Theodinel countered.
After an uncomfortable silence, Theodinel turned, and started to walk towards the enclosed training area at the back of the barracks. Just before he reached the door, he turned and looked at Kerith, and then beckoned him to follow.

Kerith raced after the rough old Sergeant, and stepped into the open enclosure. There were several Kindred here, each engaged in some sort of training. Some were shooting at straw targets with well used bows, while others were progressing through practiced spear forms. Kerith recognized many of the spear thrusts and counters, only to be confused by other movements that seemed odd. Almost improvised.

“This is where you will start your training, boy. This isn’t some plush court training ground. This is real. We train as we fight. Forget everything that you have learned so far. All it will do is get you killed.” Theodinel stated.

Confused, Kerith paused. He had spent the last 10 summers becoming proficient with both the bow and spear. If it was all for nothing, then why had he spent hours and hours pushing himself almost to breaking?

“Don’t believe me? Take up that spear, and attack me boy.” Theodinel challenged.

“…but…you are unarmed and unarmored, Sergeant…” Kerith replied.

“Ha! If you so much as touch me, boy, then I will make you Captain!” Theodinel mocked.

Kerith was conflicted. He wanted to show the old Sergeant what he could do, but at the same time, he did not want to injure his new commander. Kerith walked over to the spear rack, and with some hesitation, took up a spear. He then took up a fighting stance before the old veteran.

“Hit me boy.” Theodinel demanded.

Kerith thrusted the spear, but his heart was not in it. Instead, the Sergeant just batted it away.

“Don’t waste my time, boy. Either stick me, or go home.” Theodinel mocked.

Kerith was embarrassed, and thrust again, but the attack lacked conviction.

“If that’s the best that you can do, then we are done here.” Theodinel stated as he turned to walk away.

Just then, Kerith became aware of the others in the training enclosure. They had all stopped their training activities, and were watching the youth fumble with the old veteran. Some of them were mocking Kerith, while others just shook their heads in disapproval.

This was not how it was supposed to be. Kerith had spent almost every night of his life dreaming of his glorious acceptance into the honored warrior tradition. He had spent almost every day preparing for this moment. Now, some old fool was humiliating him on purpose, in front of those that were supposed to be his brothers and sisters.

Filled with rage at such treatment, Kerith let his frustration and disappointment overwhelm him. Kindred hearts burn bright with passion, and no more so than when that passion is denied. Without restraint, Kerith raged, and attacked Theodinel from behind. The point of his spear aimed right at the old fool’s back.

Instantly, the veteran Sergeant turned, sidestepped the thrusted spear, and redirected the point into the sandy ground. Overextended, Kerith first fell forward, and then stopped abruptly when the spear impacted with the ground. Kerith was fast, even among the Kindred. But, he was not fast enough to regain his footing before Theodinel smashed his bare fist right into Kerith’s pale left cheek. The blow was powerful, and knocked the youth to

the dirty ground.

It took Kerith a moment to regain his senses. When he was finally able, he looked up to see Theodinel standing over him. The veteran had collected his spear, and was glaring at the youth. Kerith stood uneasily, and met the Sergeant's fury. After a moment, the youth returned to the spear rack, and took up another weapon.

Some of the others in the training area started to approach the youth when he took up another weapon, but halted at a barked command from Theodinel. Kerith slowly walked over to Theodinel, and took up a fighting stance before the Sergeant. Theodinel did not move. He just stood there, glaring at Kerith.

"I gave you a chance, boy. Not everyone is up to the challenge. There is no shame. You tried. You failed. You still have a lot of seasons before you. Don't throw them away like this." Theodinel finally stated.

"I would rather die, here and now, than fail." Kerith retorted.

"So be it." Theodinel replied as he took up an unusual fighting stance.

Several heartbeats passed before Kerith could no longer bare the stillness. He launched into a basic thrust. Anyone even remotely skilled with a spear could have deflected the attack. But, that was why it was Kerith's favorite move. It was clever feint, which opened the target up to a lightning fast riposte. Kerith had used this exact same maneuver during his sparing trials, and was easily able to defeat his opponent.

Theodinel easily blocked the thrust. But, before Kerith could launch into his second attack, Theodinel stepped into the youth's path, and smashed into him with his shoulder. The youth was knocked off balance, and fell backwards to the sandy ground. Theodinel took a step back, and readied himself for the next strike.

Kerith was surprised that his favorite trick had failed, but regained his composure quickly. He rebuked himself for not striking the old Sergeant. True, the old fool had much more experience, but his

form was atrocious. He fought more like a Dwarf than an Elf! How could such a brute become a commander in the Guard?

Readying himself, Kerith adjusted his stance to one more suitable for fighting the short men, and launched a powerful attack. Mid thrust, Theodinel blocked the attack by bracing his left forearm on the haft of Kerith's spear. Overextended, Kerith watched helplessly as Theodinel delivered a powerful blow to the youth's right cheek. Surprisingly, it was with his left fist, rather than with the spear he held in his right hand. Kerith was knocked back down to the sand. When Kerith turned to face his opponent, he found Theodinel's spear tip only inches from his face.

"I told you to forget all that fancy stuff they teach you in court." Theodinel stated.

Kerith was furious. Not only had all of his dreams come crashing down around him, but now the old fool was mocking him in front of the others. It was too much. His Kindred passion swelled in his chest, raging into an inferno.

"Then make your strike, you son of an orc." Kerith replied, glaring.

"Is that really what you want, boy?" Theodinel questioned.

"I told you…I have dedicated my entire life for this day. I will not turn back now!" Kerith raged.

"You would rather die, than fail?" Theodinel asked.

"Yes! I would rather die than not live my life in the Guard!" Kerith responded.

Theodinel paused. Slowly, he moved the point of his spear away from Kerith's face, and extended his left hand to the youth. Lost in his defiance, Kerith did not respond.

"You have spirit, Kerith. I'll give you that. Take my hand." Theodinel said.

"What? Is this some kind of trick? Have you not humiliated me

enough already?" Kerith responded angrily.

"No trick." Theodinel said as he dropped his spear.

"But…I…I don't understand…" Kerith stammered.

"What you don't know could fill a library. It's my job to teach you. Take my hand. Stand." Theodinel said as he offered his hand again.

Reluctantly, Kerith took Theodinel's offered hand, and stood. Still wary of deception, Kerith looked around him. The others in the training enclosure were all staring at him with mixed expressions, but they bore him no malice.

"Every day, some young Kindred walks through that door. Raised on tales of fantasy and adventure, they think that their destiny is to ride the waves. Well, I'm here to tell you, that many will not survive their first cruise. That's what it means to serve in the Guard." Theodinel said with conviction.

"Is this how you test their resolve?" Kerith asked, calming.

"No. I don't waste my time with most. But, your reputation precedes you. You performed well in the trials, and were recommended by someone I trust. This is no game, Kerith. What we do is not some grand adventure. I admit, there are times that are better than others. Racing across the open ocean, with the wind in your hair. The sights and smells of a distant port…" Theodinel mused.

"I have dreamed of such things." Kerith admitted.

"But, those sensations come at a high price. What do you think it means to be in the Sea Guard?" Theodinel asked.

"It is one of the highest honors that our people can aspire to." Kerith replied.

"That is true. But, it often requires the greatest sacrifice. We are the first, Kerith. That's why we must master both the bow and spear. We are the first off the ship. We are the first to face the

horrors that plague our world. We must be prepared to for any threat. This requires more than just martial prowess. Otherwise, any of us could serve in the Guard." Theodinel stated.

"What is it that makes the Guard unique, Sergeant?" Kerith asked earnestly.

"Spirit, Kerith. Spirit. That unknown quality that cannot be learned. It is either part of you, or it is not. We don't have time for inspiring speeches, or lofty ideals. When we storm the beach, we must be ready to face the unknown. You can only do that if you have spirit, Kerith. The lives of your brothers and sisters depends on your spirit, just as your life depends on theirs. We do not have the luxury of retreat. If you fail, then your brothers and sisters die, Kerith. If they fail, then you die. It is that simple." Theodinel answered.

"Did I not just demonstrate my spirit, Sergeant" Kerith asked.

"Yes, and much more. You are young, and have yet to master your passions, Kerith. For the Kindred, that is dangerous. But, within that passion resides spirit. A resolve that does not falter in the face of death. It will be some time before you are ready to sail. Many seasons, perhaps. But, if you listen to me, I can forge your spirit into a weapon that is greater than any other. I will not make it easy, Kerith. My life, as well as those of my brothers and sisters, depends on how well I hone your edge." Theodinel cautioned.

"I am ready, Sergeant." Kerith declared.

"Very well. We begin now. Pick up that spear, and try to strike me." Theodinel commanded.

"Yes, Sergeant." Kerith said with a smile on his face.

Creation of fire

by Chris Davis

The human slave watched with a grim fascination born of despair and terrifying curiosity. The short armored dwarf walked around her muttering chanting almost repeating some vile debased incantation over and over. She struggled against the bronze inlaid chains and cuffs, trying to free herself from the binds but all to no avail.

She was bound to a stout wooden cross in the middle of a roughly hewn circle of earth ash and sulphur, the latter added by the armored dwarf. Around her wooden cross in an exact pattern of ashen dots on the ground were nine mounds of greater ash piled up. As the dwarf muttered and chanted the piles of ash seemed to glow and rise up, as if the very earth itself refused that which was in it. The ash mounds grew until they took on the vague shape of women, if the slave had but looked she would have seen nine exact copies of herself in each mound of ash.

The slave was far too busy screaming at this point for as each mound had grown to take the form and shape of the slave, she had burning boils leaping from her skin as if her body was boiling from the inside out. By the time the ash mounds had taken full effect there was nothing left of the slave but a limp burnt out skeleton.

Upon seeing the ash mounds at their full height the dwarf changed his tone and words to a different series of chants wards praise and utterance. For he had sensed the end of the life force of the slave and the start of her sisters of ash. Now was the time for the final strike to ensure the creations were more than just statues of ash no matter how fine the detail and scale.

Finishing his newest set of praise and holy words the nine ash statues burst into flame and as if one a spigot of flame leapt from each of them into the burnt out skeleton of the mother sister. As this gout of flame hit the burnt out skeleton it too burst into flames and became the 10th sister of fire. Upon the mother sisters flaming birth into the world all ten of the newly created ash sisters were granted their wings of pure fire. As one the ten beings of pure fire

leapt into the sky and circled high in the sky before banking to fly off into the fading light.

Far below the armored dwarf smiled a dark a smile a smile of horrors and gave quiet praise to the bull god. With his demon eyes he could see what his creations saw, and thanks to the offering of the slaves body to feed the fire he saw they would serve him well and long. For in this new world scouts were needed and what better scouts than fiery harpies of the abyss to fill such need?

Eternal

by Donn Turner

The pale glow of the full moon was being reflected from numerous grains of sand, making it appear as if hundreds of tiny stars had fallen among the endless dunes. For the roving bands of desert nomads, these false stars transformed their harsh world into a beautiful oasis of endless night. For Aseta, it brought only pain.

Aseta had emerged from her tomb complex, and was staring out at the pale desert from her ceremonial balcony. She was as still and cold as stone. Only the subtle swaying of her burial wrappings, being teased by a gentle night breeze, set her apart from the statues that adorned her sacred space.

The false light had stirred something deep within her. As the ancient memory rushed to consume her, a soft dry rattle of stale air escaped from her throat. The rich scent of the exotic incense that burned in lavish lamps. The lightness of thought that could only be brought about by a little too much spiced wine. The cool night air causing her skin to chill and prickle. Her lover's powerful embrace.

Aseta smashed aside the memory with her brutal will. Now was not the time to be lost in the past. After so long, she had finally found her prize, and she would not let herself be distracted by the ghosts of what was. Aseta tightened her grip on her ceremonial staff, and moved to the edge of the balcony.

Below her, the doors of the massive tomb complex were slowly rumbling open. Great skeletal beasts of burden, thrashing their heads about in soundless defiance, were being driven by silent masters to move the giant stone slabs. Although she could not see or hear her priests deep within the complex, she knew that they were busy rousing her soldiers. She could feel their wills lashing out at the ancient bones housed within.

Impatiently, Aseta allowed a fraction of her awareness to fall upon her troops, and willed them to move. She was only mildly satisfied when she felt her army begin to shamble forward. Her priests redoubled their efforts, lest they attract their mistress' ire. This

would have brought a smile to Aseta's lips, if she had any.

Another memory began to stir within Aseta's core. Nervous. Excited. Eager. Expectant. She felt her heart race as his lips neared hers. Her first kiss. He was so much older. Father wouldn't approve.

She had been beautiful once. So beautiful. Born into a wealthy and powerful family, she had lived a life of luxury that few could ever dream of. But, it was her beauty that had made her truly powerful.

Aseta had learned this at a very young age. Whatever she wanted, she had to but ask, and her father would move heaven and earth in order to get it for her. When she went too far, Aseta would shower her father with affection, and he would forgive her. This was a power that neither money nor station could provide.

Aseta was suddenly paralyzed by her memories. Father. He was her first love. Her protector. Her champion. When he had discovered that a household priest had dared to touch his daughter, he made an example out of him. It thrilled Aseta to watch her father punish the fool. So much anger.

Aseta forced herself to focus. Her army was just beginning to emerge from the tomb complex. They would need her guidance. Her…direction…

Father. Aseta had promised the guard one night if he would let her into the temple complex. She found her father, cold and still, on the ceremonial table. The priests had been preparing his body to be raised into the service of the Pharaoh. But, she got to him before they could finish their magics. She had grabbed his lifeless hand, and held it to her cheek. Her immaculate skin was flawed by black streaks, as her tears had caused her eyeliner to run.

Aseta stumbled. In symbiosis, her army hesitated, and then froze. The priests gazed worriedly up at their mistress. Before they could act, Aseta regained her composure, and drowned the tomb complex in her mighty will. Her presence was so powerful, that the entire army recoiled as if struck by a physical blow. Within moments, the entire host had recovered, and were marching forward again.

Aseta radiated defiance. She would not be vulnerable again. Never again…

Aseta's older brother, jealous of his father's lavish affections for his daughter, had hastily arranged a marriage to a lesser family after he took control of the household. Aseta refused, but she did not have the position or power to deny him. So, Aseta used the one power that she did have. She seduced a powerful priest, and arranged for the death of her brother and husband.

Aseta mentally summoned a skeletal slave to bring forth a heavily inscribed jar. Bowing to his mistress' will, the slave shambled forward, and bowed before her might. Aseta opened the jar, and was filled with grim satisfaction. She took her time, and enjoyed the anguished wailing of her older brother's entrapped soul. Satisfied, she sealed the jar, and returned her attention to her army. So much power…

It had taken many years, and many lovers, for Aseta to learn the magics of death. She had quickly discovered that she was very talented in the ways of death, but true skill can take a lifetime to master. So, Aseta made sure that she perfected the spells that would prolong her life, with the lives of others, first. Some of the fools were even willing.

After a mere 50 years, Aseta had acquired knowledge and skill that easily rivaled other High Priests, but she was not in a position to act on her desires. Aseta simply did not have the position or wealth to rise above the petty squabbles and political games that were now plaguing the land. If she was going to truly achieve the station that she deserved, Aseta would need a champion.

Aseta waited for the perfect opportunity. She did not have to wait long. It was during a lavish feast, honoring another conquest of the great Pharaoh Amenasis, that Aseta decided that she had finally found the perfect consort.

After all of the guests had spent hours celebrating, the music suddenly changed into something much more…appropriate…for Aseta to make her entrance. 40 beguiling maidens brought forth a

palanquin, upon which Aseta writhed. As the maidens approached the center of the great hall, Aseta reached the height of her exotic dance. All of the revelers were enraptured, but Amenasis merely looked on in amusement.

Once her performance was complete, Aseta was satisfied when Amenasis asked her to join him in his private chambers. However, she was not prepared to discover that Amenasis had been waiting for her. Even though Aseta had spent decades plotting in the shadows, she had drawn the wary attention of the Pharaoh's priests. They had warned him of Aseta's potential, and had advised him to destroy her without delay. However, Amenasis was intrigued by Aseta, and proposed an alliance. If she promised to serve him, Amenasis would make Aseta Queen. Together, they would crush the lesser families, and reign for eternity.

Aseta felt Amenasis extend his will over his Revenant Guard, and knew that it was almost time to leave the tomb complex. His presence was powerful and masculine. It amused Aseta that even after all of this time, Amenasis still made her…feel…

Aseta was enraged. No one, other than her father, had ever made her feel anything. Others were nothing more than pawns or obstacles. But, over the decades, Aseta had actually grown fond of Amenasis. He was just so…powerful. Despite her best efforts, Aseta could not control herself. And now, despite everything that they had been through, Amenasis was…distracted.

Aseta obliterated the two Revenant Guards that barred her approach, and stormed into Amenasis' chambers. He was not surprised, because he had felt Aseta's fury long before she entered the room. But, Amenasis' new toy was terrified. Good. She was little more than a child, and seeing her cower in the corner was satisfying. Amenasis was not amused.

In the end, Amenasis had to secret the girl away, because Aseta had killed and raised her entire family. Aseta, of course, was furious. Aseta was confronting her consort about the girl's whereabouts, when she suddenly felt a tremendous surge of power. Before she could weave a counter spell, a blast wave of pure hate struck the pair. As Aseta and Amenasis reeled, a sand storm consumed the

land…

Aseta felt her rage swell. She was so beautiful once. But now, she was nothing more than a withered skeleton. Held together by burial wrappings and will. She was so beautiful once…

Aseta found Amenasis in the open desert. He wasn't hiding. He had simply lost his will to go on. Aseta had spent a great deal of time and resources tracking down her former consort. She was ready to obliterate him. Utterly. Not even his essence would be allowed to remain. If he had been focused on their enemies, instead of some mortal plaything, then none of this would have happened. They could have crushed the traitors before they had summoned the storm.

She willed her soldiers to turn Amenasis over. He had collapsed face first into the sand, and Aseta wanted to see his face as she destroyed his being. When her slaves turned Amenasis over, Aseta was stunned. He had been holding something close to where his heart used to be. Some sort of mask. It had fallen from Amenasis' grip as the skeletal warriors turned him over. The face…her face!

Amenasis rode out of the tomb complex, his Revenant Guard flanking him on each side. He was so strong. So powerful. Like he once was. Almost.

She had forgiven him, of course. It had taken centuries. But, they were now of one accord. They would make them pay. They would make them all pay. While the other Cursed marched to the Abyss, Aseta and Amenasis had other plans. The dark powers may be waxing, but that was of no concern. They were going to make the traitors pay for what they did.

Aseta sat upon her throne, and put her face on. It was cracked, damaged when it had fallen out of Amenasis' grasp all those centuries ago. Even though it was flawed, it was still better than what was underneath. She was beautiful once. Now, Aseta would have to be powerful. She willed her skeletal maidens to take her out of the tomb complex.

As the skeletal legion marched out into the cold night, Aseta took

her place by Amenasis. He turned his bare skull towards her, and then back to his legion. Where once they had dreams of an eternity of pleasure, now they were filled with nothing but hate. A hatred of the traitors. A hatred of the living. A hatred of the light. Eternally bound by hate. Eternally bound by what once was. They would make them all pay…even if it took eternity.

Hamfist Borin

by Michael Leonard (MDSW)

Grobar awakened to find his head pounding. He peeled his face from the floor of the tavern where he had unceremoniously and uncharacteristically decided to sleep after a night of drinking – or was it pass out? His head was still foggy as he tried to recollect his thoughts from the prior night.

He quickly checked to make sure his gold and the rest of his belongings had not disappeared. Thankfully, all was in place as well as his two, sturdy hammers, which he would never forgive himself if he were to lose them.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” mumbled Grobar as the fragments began to fit together. It was a rather odd fellow dwarf he encountered last night on the road into Dinmore, a small, pig-farming town of little consequence. However, Dinmore was on the way through the outer country at the edge of the barely civilized territory before the expanse of the wild country set in.

He had spent many years in his bull-headed youth in the wild country during his days in the dwarven Ranger units tasked with various duties – Orc containment, keeping the Elves in their own lands, etc. Although not physically in quite the same shape as his Ranger days – Father Time not only pays his visits with a new wrinkle every year, but with a number of extra pounds, too! -he still kept his deep auburn beard trimmed short. This was not a very characteristic trait of dwarfs, but it was very common among dwarven Rangers. “A short beard does not tangle in the brush or come afoul when using your weapon,” said his old Ranger captain.

Although his beard and hair showed flecks of grey, he still felt confident in the wilds and that was the reason he was out here in the first place. All of this quickly ran through Grobar’s mind behind his thick skull before he could clear it enough to begin to think about just what exactly he was trying to think about…

“That odd dwarf,” he thought again, firmly deciding that his encounter with him and the ensuing night of drinking had been odd

indeed. After all, Grobar had recently been convinced to come out of his semi-retirement at the bequest of a rather important dwarven Lord of Rowyn, a neighboring county in the southeast section of the dwarven lands of Regdor.

Although he had never met the man, his envoys were very convincing in their roles to get Grobar to accept a simple run-through the wildlands with a sealed parchment to the outskirt dwarven kingdom of Rogrim in the northwest. It seemed a very simple task given his old familiarity with the lands, his ability to knock orcs in the head, and that the gold offered was just too good to pass up. Although it would be a long trip back and forth, it would do him good to get active again. Grobar simply thought to himself while still shaking out the cobwebs in his head that this was no way to start the trip.

Grobar looked around and saw a small number of patrons sleeping rather uncomfortably in various positions throughout the tavern and made his way over to Regda Mull. The tavern owner was in a small, open room back beside the closed pantry where all of the tavern's foodstuffs, wine and ale were stored. With no more an elaborate theft-deterrent device than a chain fastened on the closed pantry door's handle and the other end shackled around the tall, lanky tavern owner's ankle, Grobar noticed him snoring blissfully and noisily with his shackled leg hanging off one side of the cot.

Thinking better than to wake him, he tossed five copper pieces between his legs and turned to go. Grobar picked up his supply belt, hammers, fastened his shield to his back, and decided it would also be a good idea to pack up the remnants of his last night's meal to take with him. The long road ahead offered no further hospitable Inns of even such low renown as this one until he was well within the realm of Rogrim.

Well, at least not hospital to a respectable dwarf, as he thought of the elvish lands he will need to skirt along the outer reaches. Yes, an extra loaf of bread, half a bottle of wine and some cheese would make a nice snack later on and a welcome break from what he could hunt and forage, along with his dried foods he had packed for the journey

Grobar stepped to the door of the tavern and opened to only be greeted by that confounded sun deciding to shine much too brightly this morning. As he squinted until not only his eyes but his entire head hurt, he heard a tired voice from behind say, “Careful on your travels, Hamfist.” Grobar turned to see Regda wiping the sleep from his eyes and standing in the doorway of his room removing the shackle from his leg. Grobar grunted in response and left the doorway out onto the small road that led further into the wild country.

Hamfist… that was a nickname given to him in his Ranger days, and although there were few people around these days that remembered it, let alone called him that, it always did bring back fond memories. While being an average height dwarf, coming up to a normal man’s shoulder, Grobar was built not only a bit more sturdy than your normal dwarf, but had what seemed to be the largest set of hands most people would ever think could be possible.

Maybe that is the reason that he always favored the feel of a heavy dwarven hammer in each hand. While some of his fellow Rangers became very adept at crossbows or shields and axes, Grobar favored the demolishing swing a heavy hammer could do, and always swung both high and low – in no particular order, but always to devastating effect.

The small road became smaller and smaller as the day wore on, until it was not more than a trail through the craggy rocks and underbrush. He stopped for the night, and thought he could hear a faint howl from the distance. It did not sound so much as an animal howl he was used to, but more like a screeching howl. As the night quieted down and he tried to force some sleep, he could not get his mind off of the odd dwarf.

“Now, what made him so odd?” he mumbled. Maybe it was the way he happened to be coming down the same road into Dinmore around dusk the evening before. Maybe it was the particular way he was dressed, a peculiar mix of his steel armor and foppish clothes. What was his name again?

“Gordel,” said Grobar aloud, almost shouting it, and then slapping a

ham hand to his mouth. Must keep quiet in the wild lands, as you never know what you will come across. Gordel seemed unusually talkative, while not actually saying anything of substance, like everything just needed his own, extra commentary. Grobar being a Ranger during most of his youth was not of the particularly talkative type and Gordel's ceaseless yapping was not only annoying, but uncharacteristic for a dwarf.

"We need a drink and some food over here, pronto," shouted Gordel as they took a seat at a small table in the tavern, which seemed to be full of patrons from the surrounding areas. Grobar knew most of these not to be actual travelers, as they were, but just the 'locals.'

"His name is Regda and he is a good man. I have come here many times in years past and he has always been here."

"Well, then Regda, my good man, let's keep the wine coming!" Gordel laughed raucously and slapped Grobar on the shoulder. The he leaned close, "I can tell that you are one of those Rangers and I'll bet nothing gets past your nose. Always a clever eye for observation. Yes sir, a real benefit to have on any journey." Regda set down two large loaves of bread, a rather large wedge of pale yellow cheese and a very dark bottle of wine with two deep goblets.

Grobar began to eat and drink as Gordel droned on about everything and nothing. At one point during the lecture, Grobar excused himself to go out back to the outhouse. While he relieved himself he leaned his head against the front wall. For some reason it just always made the going easier. After he finished, he checked his inside pocket for the sealed parchment that was bound for Lord Thiflar in Rogrim. Safe and sound.

"Why don't I just say, 'nice knowing ya' and get back out onto the road?" It was not that he did not like the fellow; he just could not learn anything from all Gordel was saying. And there was one thing Grobar always had to do in every situation, learn everything – that's what can keep you out of trouble and save your skin. Oh well; He went back in and took his seat across from Gordel. Once seated, Gordel started on about a story his mother used to tell him to make him behave. Grobar just continued to eat and pour wine. Was this the second or third bottle?

Grobar could not remember now just what the latest topic of conversation was, maybe he was still on the story his mother used to tell him, he simply could not remember much except things started to get cloudy and the last thing he could remember from last night was when Gordel leaned in very close and said, just above a whisper, "…and that is where you come in…"

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For three more days Grobar travelled, always checking to make sure the parchment was still in place and his thick boots padding noiselessly across the varying terrain where the trail was no more. Sometimes it was rocky outgrowth, sometimes overgrown brush, tall trees and dense forest, but always Grobar moved quickly and surefooted. That is why he was so surprised when the ground seemed to give way underneath and he fell through the earth into what seemed to be a shallow cavern.

If the fall did not surprise Grobar, what he found staring back at him with the widest open set of eyes he had ever seen certainly did. The eyes belonged to three large orcs, each holding some unidentifiable part of what looked like a chicken in various positions of shoving it whole into their gaping mouths. The four of them just sat and stared at each other, everyone dumbfounded and incapable of movement. However, Grobar did take just a second to think, "If they open their eyes any bigger, I think they will pop right out of their heads," and that was when everything exploded into movement.

The three orcs simultaneously jumped from their seats with chicken remnants bursting from their mouths and grabbed large clubs setting beside the seats. Grobar had already loosed his twin hammers and hefted one in each hand. In his right was his father's own hammer, Invicta Bold, inscribed with the runes of Helvdor and given to him upon his death. In his left was his own hammer, simply called Rock, given to him by his father when he was a boy, even before his Ranger days. Having these two parts of his father with him always seemed to give him a confidence and strength that he could not explain. Both hammers appeared well worn and quite regular looking, but Grobar 'Hamfist' Borin would have no others.

The three orcs circled Grobar while making an unnecessary amount of noise, yelling incoherently, growling and snarling. He had encountered many orcs in his time, but never alone and never ones that seemed so feral – like they did not belong to any clan. The smallest of the three leapt at Grobar with its club on a backhanded swing from the left. The club sailed over Grobar's head with only a slight duck and the deft uppercut from Bold gave the satisfying crunch of contact just on the inside of the bottom of the jaw. This would crush the entire inside of the mouth and shove teeth and bone into the nasal cavity, stopping nearly all breathing along with fatal bleeding. The orc quickly crumpled to the floor.

The second and third orcs, both bigger than the first, jumped at the same time. The biggest of the three gave a huge, two-handed downward chopping swing that was designed to drive anyone, especially a short dwarf, into the ground like a tent spike. Grobar ducked forward and let the blow glance off of his shield strapped to his back. This move brought Grobar right in front of the orc and a low sweeping left to right swing of Rock connected with the fragile outside of the right knee and took the orc's kneecap completely off and creating a bend in the knee that was certainly not the way it was supposed to bend. Grobar quickly spun around to face the other orc that was already in mid swing coming directly at the right side of his face. Grobar instinctively brought up Bold to block the blow, which made both the orc's club and Bold smash into the right side of Grobar's head. Instinctively, Rock quickly jumped forward into the orc's chest, pushing it back and Bold came down and hit the forehead ending in a splattering of dark green blood and brain matter.

Grobar could still hear the largest orc bellowing and before he could turn around, his right foot was pulled from under him and he fell over to his right side with the orc quickly climbing on top of his back. Grobar could feel strong hands beginning to close around his throat, the thick muscles of the orc began to squeeze with a pain escalating to an immediately alarming level and the edges of Grobar's vision began to turn dark.
Grobar got onto his hands and knees and strained to get his feet under him. If he succumbed to the weight of this orc with its hands around his neck he would not see sunlight again.

“Get up you fat, old fool!” Grobar’s mind flashed as his own thick muscles strained to get into a crouching position and he jumped into the air pushing backwards. This made Grobar and the orc crash back onto the ground, this time with Grobar making a sandwich of the orc between himself and the hard ground. The compact weight of the dwarf with his shield on his back placed firmly against the orc’s chest knocked nearly all of the wind out of the orc once they smashed to the ground, but while Grobar was able quickly get out of the grasp of the orc and to his feet, the orc quickly got to its’ knees trying to grapple again with Grobar. That was when Grobar’s knee came up under the orc’s chin and Bold came down sending a spray of teeth and blood in every direction and the last orc fell limp.

Grobar panted heavily, leaning in a semi-crouched position. It had been a number of years since he had this much activity. *I am not too old for all of this*, he thought, but he had not been on the road long enough to get back into shape,. Grobar began to think about the consequences if he had not been able to shake that last orc from his back, or if he had not dispatched the other two before that happened, when he heard a small sound.

It was a gurgling sound from the further corner of the cavern to his right. He looked about and saw one exit tunnel towards the back left and thought if another orc was hiding and more came rolling through the tunnel into the small cavern, he would have no choice but to either fight his way into the tunnel or try and climb back out the hole he came through. The gurgling turned into a cooing sound with a small growl and he crept closer to the far end of the cavern.

He started to make out what looked like a large pile of branches and straw as the small noises continued. The three orcs had been making so much noise he had not noticed these sounds from the corner of the room before. He peered over the edge of the makeshift pile on the floor and saw a small, green face stare back at him. A baby orc? Was the smallest of the three orcs a female? Possibly so, but in any case no love for the greenskins left no remorse in his mind. Grobar lifted his large boot over the infant.

“You’ll grow up really fast and be hunting me in no time,” grumbled Grobar. “Quickly out of your misery is your fate my small friend,” as Grobar’s foot came down and the vision was already in

his head of the inevitable outcome, the chubby green infant looked at Grobar and gave a small laugh.

His foot stopped inches above the baby orc's head and unbalanced nearly making Grobar topple over. *A laugh? A giggle? Surely not from an orc – I don't think they know how to laugh*, thought Grobar. Had he ever heard of an orc doing anything but yelling, taunting, bellowing, growling? He did not think so. Surely the baby greenskin had a bit of gas (which usually emits noisily from both ends) and could not find anything funny in its certain demise. Grobar looked closely at the infant. The infant looked back at Grobar, and smiled.

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"Stupid, stupid, stupid," grumbled Grobar as he started to make his way through the tunnel leading out of the small cavern. The infant was strapped to his chest in cloth wrappings facing outward, his chunky green legs giving kicks every now and then while the infant orc made bubbling and gurgling sounds with an occasional small laugh thrown in. Grobar had already searched the cavern area for any foodstuffs or anything of value and only finding a somewhat large stash of rotten food.

Of course, this type of food was excellent for orcs to eat, and he certainly should have left it along with his stomach reeling from the stench. But, Grobar knew this baby would be hungry and he could not afford to feed it with the sparse food he brought and with what little he could catch and forage on the journey. He still had about 4 weeks to go before reaching Rogrim. What he planned to do when he got there with a baby greenskin, he did not know.

"How fast do you little ones grow anyway?" wondered Grobar. He knew they grew fast, fairly lethal within the year. Oh well, he would have to find a nice doorstep to leave it on. "Sanctuary!" Grobar mused.

Grobar at first tried to get back out the hole he had dropped through, but even a full grown man could not have reached the top edge. With nothing left after the fight to stand on and not being able to blame his lack of reaching the top edge on his dwarfish height, he started through the dark tunnel.

The small fire that lit the inside of the cavern quickly dimmed from view after a few turns. His eyes struggled to see in the lightless tunnel. Although dwarf eyes are readily able to see much better than a man's in darkness, they cannot see in total darkness. He fumbled along feeling the rough wall pass by his calloused hands. Grobar's mind began to wander again.

"Odd dwarf in Dinmore, pass out from drinking (are you kidding me?!), an orc baby strapped to my chest, a rank pile of food in my pack, and to what, feed an inevitably hungry greenskin?" Grobar felt the words of his father come to him in his last days. He had returned home for only a short time when he received news of his father's health while far out into the territories on Ranger patrol. It had taken him a week to get back home.

"You look terrible, Grobar," Gimland Borin said.

"I am supposed to tell you that," Grobar said under a heavy heart. He had seen his once strong father grow weaker and weaker with each passing year for many years now. Grobar had hurriedly joined one of the King's Ranger units when he was young and spent many years out of the family home. Only coming back as his time or preference would allow, he never thought of his father as someone that could ever weaken, let alone pass from this earth. Now he lay upon his deathbed with his long grey beard spilling over the sides of his weakened body.

"I will tell you Grobar; you are my boy and always will be. I have loved you from the moment you were born and through every bit of your life. I am just so sorry I did not tell you that more often. I wanted you to grow up strong and able to live a good life. Make your own decisions; take care of your affairs and all."

"I know you have loved me. You never gave me any reason to doubt that."

"What I have learned is life is not as long and planned as we would like to think. You run out of time and can't ever go back and change decisions you have already made. Not every decision I have made has been a good one. But, now I lay here, unable to move, thinking

about everything I did not do very well – these things leave regrets," Gimland said softly.

"What do you have to regret about? You have lived a good life, spent many years in the service of the King's Guard, fought bravely during all three great wars, took good care of mother, what else is left?" said Grobar.

"You are left!" choked Gimland Borin on his last few breaths as he grasped Grobar's arm with the feeble strength still left in his once powerful hands. "I love your mother more than you will ever know and she has stood by me through everything, but you are the only part of me I leave behind in this world. It is you I should have nurtured more and given more. I could have given more of myself to you so that you could carry on in our name in the manner that is what a caring person should do," said Gimland.

"You did what you could. I was not always here close to home," said Grobar. "What else could you have given me?"

"A reason to care," Gimland said in a voice so soft that it could barely be called a whisper. "A reason to give."

With that, Gimland Borin gave a final exhale and passed from our earth. Grobar felt a sting begin to well in his eyes, but the tears would not come. He sat there for a moment looking at the frail figure that had once been his strong father and tried to connect this last conversation. He had to report back to the Ranger unit soon and could not figure this out or just how he felt over the death of his father.

Helegda Borin, Grobar's mother, slowly entered. She touched her husband's cheek and stayed for a moment to feel the last bit of warmth leave his body. Her eyes were wet when she said to Grobar, "I have something for you."

They entered the next small room that stored most of the family belongings and Helegda opened Gimland's large steel chest. When Grobar was still young, he remembered his father on the final trip coming home from the last of the great wars, remove his articles and place them all within the chest. Grobar had never looked in the

chest and his father never spoke of what happened during his time in the Guard units during the wars. But, he knew this stoic man would have many things he had seen and lived through that would affect him until his last days. Grobar could now see into his father's old chest and lying on top of rusted and dark stained armor and chainmail, was a dwarven-forged steel hammer.

"Your father always told me he wanted you to have this and should have given it to you himself," said Helegda. "But, I think what he wanted to say to you in private was more important."

"I met your father shortly after the first great war. I could not bear the thought of him leaving when the second great war started and he was called into service again, as I was just a few months from your birth, but off he had to go," Helegda spoke while looking off out of the small window. "It was when he returned from the second war that he had this hammer. He told me it was a gift from the Lord of Helvdor, inscribed with ancient runes that he was told meant 'strong strike.' Your father had single handedly fought off the last throng of orcs that had broken through the line and threatened the Lord himself. He was asked to stay on as the personal guard of the Lord of Helvdor, but he wanted nothing more than to come home to us."

Helegda now looked directly at her son with the tears still spilling from her eyes, "This hammer is Invicta Bold and your father cherished this above no other possession, even me I think." She choked back a sob and continued, "I think that is what brought him out again years later when the third war started." She handed the battle-worn hammer to Grobar.

Grobar carefully took the hammer and stared at it. Its large steel head had one blunt end and a slightly sharpened end on the other. The head was forged onto a metal shaft with the final end wrapped in a thick leather grip. The hammer's name was embossed on one side of the head in old dwarvish while the middle of the shaft had very small, elaborate runes inscribed, which Grobar could not read. If these typically magic runes meant 'strong strike,' he wondered just what kind of power this gave to the weapon. He hefted it in his strong hand and it wielded like it was pounds lighter than it appeared. What he wouldn't give to try it out in a battle in the wildlands.

“Is this what my father meant about regrets?” thought Grobar. Did he let the draw of this weapon take him away from his family when he thought he should be with us and helping me to grow? It did not seem much like his father to think so, but the last few words he just had with him made him think harder. What did he mean by wanting me to care? To give?

As Grobar continued forward into the dark tunnel for what seemed like much too long, he could not tell if he still was in a tunnel or if he had even entered into a much larger cavern, but he still followed the wall with his right hand feeling the rough passage as he continued forward.

He thought about what he had in his life so far… A decent career and modest wealth from his years spent as a Ranger. Although no wife and family, he thought of himself as too old now to start and had only ever really loved one woman long ago. However, the Ranger life left no room to sit idle and start a family. He looked back at this as regret and thought for a moment about the beautiful Krestia he had left in tears so many years ago when he packed his ranger gear and left her and the town with his unit.

It was then that he saw the faintest glimpse of light far ahead. He blinked his eyes and tried to open them wider to make sure this was not a trick. The baby simply giggled and said, “Orf.” Grobar continued until he could make out the opening and finally stood out into the bright sun again. For the second time recently, he squinted hard as the light hurt his eyes, but it felt good. The baby let out a rolling laugh that also made Grobar chuckle.

“You seem to be a very happy little bugger to be out of the dark,” said Grobar. “I would have thought the sun would hurt your eyes, but you seem to enjoy it. In fact, you seem to be enjoying my company much more than you should. Where am I going to get rid of you?” It was then that he felt just a tiny pang of something. He kind of liked this little bugger of a guy. His father’s last words and the lost vision of Krestia and a family life all came crashing into his head. “Oh shit,” thought Grobar, “Here it is,” as he stared into the pudgy baby orc’s smiling face. “I guess it is you and me for now, Bugger.”

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Grobar made sure to get as much distance as possible between the cavern and the two of them before nightfall. However, this was not before he needed to make a number of stops along the way.

“Bugger, how much could you possibly poop?!” he exclaimed to the kicking infant as Grobar’s huge hands tried to dress the baby’s bottom as best he could from fresh cloths.

“The next stream we come to, I am going to give you a good soaking,” he said. Bugger just snorted and grinned to show impossibly large teeth that should not rightfully fit into his mouth. Grobar allowed the baby greenskin to eat from the pile of what looked like scraps from last week’s meal, while his own stomach turned.

“You can really pack it away, can’t you? Well, we have to get a good night’s rest before we start off in the morning, so you just sit tight right here.” Grobar fastened a length of rope around Bugger’s ankle to his own belt, a trick borrowed from Regda Mull, in case the baby decided to wander off while Grobar was asleep. However, Bugger’s eyes soon closed, and he was snoring like a champion. Grobar had just the last remnants of various thoughts before he drifted off to sleep as well.

“How dangerous is this to keep hold of a baby orc, and for how long can I expect to care for it before I can find a place that I can leave him? I do not actually think it will be long before Bugger is up and walking, and maybe I should just let him fend for himself. Soon, we will be navigating around the elven territories, and that is nowhere I really want to be with the tenuous diplomacy between the two races at the moment. And what was what seemed like a family of orcs doing in a cavern in what is not normally considered orc territory?” These wildly fleeting thoughts caromed throughout his head in the final moments before sleep. It was not very ranger-like and very uncharacteristic of Grobar to not hear the far off wail in the night that came from no animal.

A couple of uneventful days furthering his trek occurred without

much incident. Well, if you can call cleaning the most horrible green, snot-like substance from Bugger's rear end while taking every opportunity for a dunk in any convenient stream or watering hole uneventful. Grobar did feel terrible about defiling the small pond yesterday with this toxic orc waste, but it could not be helped. Already Bugger was toddling along with the rope secured around Bugger's waist with the other end tied to Grobar's belt.

Grobar and Bugger spent a number of peaceful pre-evening dusks watching the small fairies light up and take to the sky. Bugger's eyes watched in amazement as several of the small creatures decided to take a closer look and flittered about just in front of his nose. Bugger reached out to grab an exceptionally dainty and well-formed fairy nymph.

"Oh no, don't do that, Bugger. Ha! They don't like that very much," Grobar said with a jolly laugh. Bugger smiled and quickly fell asleep under the fairy-lit sky. Grobar soon followed suit and kept the rope tied, just to be on the safe side.

One day, while clambering down a slight incline, which was a bit steep for Bugger's wavering legs, the toddler orc took a spill that prompted a sprawling cry. Grobar scooped up Bugger with the best consoling manner he could muster and said, "Grobar's got you. Grobar will get you down OK. Don't worry."

"Grubber," said the small orc.

"Gro-bar," retorted the dwarf.

"Grubber," Bugger said followed by a loud resounding belch.

"Well, then," said Grobar, "How can we argue with that?!" Grobar laughed, and Bugger smiled with his famously large teeth.

Later that day when arriving at a stream to once again to clean off Bugger's toxic-waste creation portal, Grobar was fixated on only inhaling through his mouth and did not hear the number of soft boots approach from behind.

A haughty voice sneered, "It appears here that we have a nursemaid

and her cub. I did not think even dwarfs stooped that low to sire orclings."

Grobar turned slowly, his hammers slung into his belt always at the ready for a quick draw, but he decided it best to keep them put in place. Surrounding the dwarf and the toddler orc were a band of six tall elves with bows drawn tightly. Grobar could see their forest attire in a uniform fashion and quickly surmised this was an elf Scout party patrolling the edges of their borders, as he had for so many years along the dwarven territories. Grobar could see the keen-eyed elves peering down the length of each shaft of their drawn arrow and knew he would be punctured fatally before he could free Bold and Rock and come close to any of the elves.

"I am Grobar Borin, and I am on an honorable mission to the dwarven Lord Thiflar in Rogrim. This orc was from a family that I was forced to kill. I could not leave it – I don't know exactly why." Grobar started to say he would not be staying and would continue away from the elf territories, but was cut short by the only elf that seemed to have a voice.

"We believe nothing you say in these times. It is not up to me to figure out your true intention, and you will answer to Lord Blestron in Fabendale." The elf motioned Grobar and the tiny orc up the embankment with the tip of his arrow still pointing at Grobar's wide chest.

"Great," thought Grobar. "Now I need to waste time answering a bunch of questions in fancy Fabendale with Lord what's-his-name Blustery." Grobar was far more worried what fate was in store for Bugger than for himself. Grobar once again strapped Bugger to his chest and started up the embankment where there were six waiting elvish horses. The most indignant part of all of this was being tied onto one of the horses facing backwards. Grobar got a grand glimpse of everything as it was passing by to his front with Bugger snorting at the dust being kicked up by the quick pace of the horse's hooves. "Just don't you fill your shorts now, or I will have to smell it all the way to Fabendale."

Fabendale was not a very large city in the terms of the elvish lands, but a decent city nonetheless. Grobar and Bugger were ushered

quickly through town to the modest hall where undoubtedly Lord 'Blusterbutt' sat making all sorts of elf decisions. Grobar had just a few dealings with the elves since the start of the small border skirmishes between the dwarven and elven territories that started a number of years after the end of the third Great War. Grobar had entered into the Ranger units well after the end of the third war and was well versed in trying to maintain dwarven borders and territories from the snooty elves and their high thinking issues that always thought their lands should be wider than they should. However, being out of the Ranger business for a number of years, he had not kept up with current politics between the races as much as he should have, so a quiet tongue seemed like the best course of action until he was able to see just what this was all about. After spending what seemed like the most part of the day in a small cell with Bugger gleefully tossing about the small stool, which was the only piece of furniture in the small cell, the door was finally opened and two tall and slender elf guards motioned for the two of them to come.

Grobar saw that Lord 'Blisterbottom' was seated behind a very large table in a grand chair. He rather expected a throne-like room, but this looked like the chamber of a working politician more than anything else. The walls were lined with bookcases with volume upon volume of books and parchments. The high ceiling did make every step into the chamber echo with a coldness that was not unlike the personality of every elf he had ever come across. Grobar did notice with his own internal satisfaction that his boot steps did not make any sound at all. "Heh, I still got the Ranger glide after all," thought Grobar.

Lord Blestron peered up from the parchment he was reading and looked at Grobar from under his narrow brow. Besides the two guards in the room, there were what appeared to be two scribes at the end of the long table with quill and parchment. The elven Lord was dressed impeccably, as most elves always seemed to be overdressed for every occasion, and spoke in a booming voice that was quite un-elflike.

"Name?"

"Grobar Borin, son of Gimland," said Grobar in as husky and dwarven of a voice he could muster. The scribes' quills scratched in

unison into their parchments. They both looked up at Grobar with bored expressions waiting for the next painfully important item to scribble down during this encounter. Bugger had the rope fastened around him with the other end secured to Grobar's belt. The elves had removed his hammers and pack, but thought it amusing to leave the tiny orc tethered to the squat dwarf. Bugger was hiding behind Grobar and peered out around his waist to give the elven Lord a wide-eyed stare.

"Fabendale does not take lightly when dwarves are sneaking about its borders. Given the recent events and the news we are receiving from the northern territories, we can only expect that there are spies everywhere. Why are you here?"

Grobar cleared his throat, "Lord Beltbuster, I am on a mission to deliver sealed orders to the honorable dwarven Lord Thiflar in the northern territory of Rogrim." Grobar continued, "I am not aware of any current situations in the northern territories, and I am no spy."

Lord Blestron stood up, peered even closer and leaned over the large table that stood like a castle wall between himself and Grobar. "I have no time to sit and figure out what an old dwarf and his pet orc are doing along our borders. Your sealed parchment will be opened and read. If you are convicted a spy, you will be killed, and I can get on with the matters at hand."

Pet orc? Grobar had nearly forgotten poor Bugger hiding behind him and peeking out. "I have told you, I do not know what else is going on in any other territory. I have been in the wildlands for nearly a week, and I already explained to your men that this orc was left over from a family that I killed. I… I just could not leave him. Please let me return to my journey with my parchment and belongings, and I will be gone from your borders within the day."

Lord Blestron walked quickly around the closest end of the table until he was standing directly in front of Grobar, who always disliked having to crane his head up to look at men and elves. Their tall manner seemingly thrown into the faces of dwarfs, they relished their height superiority. However, this elf stooped over so he was looking directly into Grobar's face. This move surprised Grobar, and he could see in his quick stride and build that Blestron was no mere

low ranking royalty or politician, but a dangerous foe, indeed.

“Do you mean to tell me you have not heard of the stolen Talisman of Ardol and its recent arcane use to raise the dissidents of death? Anyone spending nights in the wildlands would surely have heard the wails of the foul banshees at night. Already there are towns and villages to the north that have been stripped and the residents drained clean of life,” Lord Blestron said with urgency.

“I know of no such news!” Grobar said with sincerity. “If this was true, and I have no doubt you speak the truth, then it very well may be that my journey to Rogrim should not be delayed any further.”

“I will decide that,” said Lord Blestron. “Although I do respect the official seal on the parchment you carry, it will hold no matter if it must be opened and read to discover its contents and whether you carry the news of a spy regarding any of the elven kingdoms. And you, traveling with this tiny orc? For what possible purpose?” Lord Blestron could see the real closeness that the small orc seemed to hold towards the sturdy dwarf. Why was it hiding behind this dwarf like a frightened child? What kind of odd connection was this that mocked the order of things? With this, he reached down and picked up the tiny orc and lifted him up face-to-face as if to inspect him closer.

“Nothing good can come of this. Poor Bugger,” thought Grobar. Bugger’s eyes opened wide and a pained look came across his face as Lord Blestron’s expression seemed to turn from curiosity to almost disgust. That is when the eruption occurred.

As if in glorious, synchronic harmony, a simultaneous belch of such impressive power as to render the heartiest of dwarfs to shame, coupled with an expulsion of methane from the small orc’s rear, equally as loud and resonant, echoed throughout the chamber. Not only did the eviction of gas from both ends occur with massive force, but the duration was so long that Grobar thought the deafening event might never end. Grobar could not dare even look into Lord Blestron’s face to see what would come next.

The noble elf was stone silent, as if struggling just exactly what to say. Was it rage? Indignation? Suddenly, a booming laugh burst

forth from Lord Blestron and continued until true tears rolled down his cheeks. Even Grobar started to chuckle as did the two scribes and even the guards ventured to share a giggle, then a guffaw. Lord Blestron gingerly set Bugger down, where the small orc just turned to look at Grobar and flash a small smile from a mouth that still had a long way to go to fit his still oversized teeth.

Lord Blestron used the sleeve of his shirt to wipe the tears from his face. “Truly, you are a special one!” he exclaimed. “I will not insult your character enough to say that you have shown this orc a fine example, but I will not be the one to delay your important task. You will be released with your belongings and your sealed parchment intact.”

“You are a wise leader, and your city benefits from your example,” said Grobar with ever so slight of a nod of his head.

“Take heed, Grobar Borin, do not delay in removing the both of you from elvish lands. And, take heed of the events that are stirring around us now,” said Lord Blestron in a commanding tone.

Quickly ushered out by the tall guards, Grobar and Bugger took back their belongings. Grobar’s two hammers felt extra nice to be in his belt again, and they found themselves escorted to the edge of the border where the two disappeared quickly into the dense forest.

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This time, Grobar dispensed with the rope, as Bugger seemed to have no issue following closely. The orc seemed to have grown in just the past few days where he could no longer be considered a toddler. Bugger scampered about and would only dare a spurt of a few paces ahead of Grobar before he would pad back and follow along.

Grobar would point out some of the interesting things that he observed on their trek. A strange bug, dangerous plants, the best places to find food and where to lie for the night. When Grobar found a suitable location, they both quickly relaxed.

Grobar thought of the danger that, uh, Lord Bluenose, was it?... had

mentioned. Were the state of the lands deteriorating around him and he did not realize? He had always prided himself in learning and knowing every condition and situation to its fullest. It had kept himself and many of his fellow Rangers out of trouble in the past. Was he getting old, or maybe just going soft in caring for this young orc, and missing what should be obvious?

However, he saw no signs indicating there was this turmoil in the lands. Maybe he was just simply too far out in the wildlands to pick this up. With another week of travel, they would be in Rogrim and he would be sure to get the information he needed from a friendlier group of fellow dwarfs. He was not about to start making grand inquiries in Fabendale. Elves are not in the habit of answering anyone's questions – let alone a dwarf's.

Just as the small fire was beginning to die on this comfortable night, Grobar sat bolt upright just before it started. When the rattling wail began it immediately sent every hair on the back of Grobar's neck straight up. It was bone-chilling, and the cry permeated right through your soul to make Grobar wish he were anyplace besides right here. Bugger quickly moved to Grobar and clutched his shirt, although he kept his head up as if to try and catch a whiff of this strange beast with the other-world sound.

"Grubber, bad 'ding out 'dere," said Bugger quietly.

Grobar could not tell just how close it was, but it was still away from them. The shrieking wail seemed to carry through the forest and even the trees seemed to shudder from the sound. The terrible shriek would grow and quiet to an unnerving moan and seemed to come from all directions at once. It was impossible to tell from the exact direction that it came from.

This night could not end soon enough for the both of them. When the shrieking finally died down, Grobar could not tell whether the terrible banshee had simply stopped for an unknown reason or had moved off into another direction. Grobar knew when the banshees would wail and scream that death was not far off.

The two unlikely characters continued on towards Rogrim. Grobar's thoughts lie only in getting to Rogrim and delivering the parchment

and getting back to his home in the far southeast corner of the small county of Udaheld. If there were indeed the denizens of the undead prowling the north, then it would not be wise to continue traipsing about. Maybe this parchment from the Lord of Rowyn provided some sort of answer.

Even Bugger seemed uneasy, but always managed a toothy smile when Grobar spoke to him. They talked softly as they moved onward through the forest and brush. Bugger's words and speaking were coming along and already he had grown past Grobar's hip, mid-way up his chest. "By thunder, you orcs grow fast," said Grobar at last trying to make a light joke.

As they approached the deep ravines of the orc wild country, Grobar knew the best idea was to stay in the thick of the brush and trees. If they should happen to come across a band of orcs, Grobar had no idea how Bugger would react. He could not bear himself having to fight orcs in front of Bugger and with a steely resolve pushed the thought from his mind. After all, he knew he and Bugger would not be together forever and any resolution he played out in his mind ended badly.

Grobar thought about the last few moments again with his father as they skirted along the edge of a long, deep canyon ravine. He also recalled when he had received the news while out on Ranger patrol many years ago about the death of his mother. What had he ever cared about? What had he given? Is he giving now and caring for this small defenseless orc? No doubt if it was not now it would be soon that Bugger could fend for himself, although he is still so small.

"I think I know what you had been trying to tell me," said Grobar softly to himself as he watched Bugger run up a pace or two and turn around to quickly smile as if to say, "It's safe to go through here!"

At first it was the large cloud of dust that caught Grobar's attention. Bugger was busy sniffing a large bug with wings and was watching it fly away when Grobar motioned for Bugger to get low in the brush. Grobar peered out across the canyon and saw a great expanse reach out and flow down to his right. Moving across the

land heading south was more orcs than he could count.

“It’s a mass orc movement – are they moving to war?” mumbled Grobar. No, this was not only orc warriors, but all manner of orcs; small, old, possibly females, all kinds. It appears that they were moving out of the north wildlands and something was driving them south.

Grobar looked over to Bugger and saw him intently watching the orcs move past in the distance. He made no move to break cover and even if he did, Bugger would have no way to cross the deep ravine that separated them. The stayed for another few moments and when Grobar realized he was watching Bugger’s reaction to watching the orcs than he himself was actually watching the orcs, Grobar decided it was time to keep going.

He motioned Bugger to follow him back through the brush out of sight of the moving orcs. He did not know what would happen if some orcs did catch a glimpse of this unlikely duo across the ravine, but he did not want to find out.

The two of them continued northwest towards Rogrim, which was still a number of days away. It was now during this time for all his years of moving about the country that he had wished for dwarfs to have picked up the use of horses. Of course they made movement easier and faster, but that meant staying to the main roads which actually made for a further trip. Travelling through the country and the trees felt natural and the way it was supposed to be. Besides, Grobar felt the same way about horses as most dwarfs did – smelly, stubborn beasts and they brought a dwarf too far off of the ground. A dwarf was born of this earth and was meant to stay firmly planted to it.

Grobar was thankful for the next number of miles that he and Bugger moved without speaking. He was unsure how Bugger would reflect on seeing orcs and thought they should discuss it when Bugger was ready.

After having just stopped for a few small items to eat, they heard the voices carrying through the trees and brush. He quickly brought up his hand for Bugger to stop and Grobar craned his head to one

side to listen where the voices were coming from. He motioned Bugger to follow him over to his left and they crept to a thick bush at the base of a large tree and peered through.

Grobar saw two dwarfs around a makeshift stone ring where it appeared the smaller of the two was beginning to build a small fire. The larger was seated on a stone. Grobar could not quite tell what kind of dwarfs these were, as they appeared dark and devilish to him. They spoke in an odd language that Grobar was able to only pick up every few words.

“Rogrim” and “Caltorn” and “Death” and “Orcs” were a few of the words. These were foul dwarfs indeed and could only be the wretched dark dwarfs from the far north. They had no business this far south, let alone speaking of Rogrim. It was after a hearty laugh from the two when the largest of the pair quickly stopped and spat into the dirt with seeming disgust and hatred is when Bugger gave out a small growl.

The smaller of the two dwarfs was still standing and quickly picked up his axe and charged for the bush. No hiding now thought Grobar and he clenched Bold and Rock and burst forth out of the brush charging and yelling.

The dark dwarf stopped just before Grobar, looked him square in the eye and let a snarled grin spread on his lips. He then swung his axe in a right arc aimed at taking Grobar’s head off at his shoulders. Quickly, Rock came up and the shafts of hammer and axe smashed together. Grobar gave a small push downward and locked the heads to the weapons together. The superior weight of the hammer in Grobar’s strong hands made it easy to then rip the axe from the surprised dwarf’s hand.

Bold swung low and smashed clean through the left tibia in a splintering sound that made the dark dwarf topple. On the way down, Rock gave a downward swing that caved in the helmet of the dwarf’s right side and left him dead before he hit the dirt.

By now the big dwarf was up. Grobar could not tell until now just how big this dwarf was. He noticed his hands made even Grobar’s thick ham fists looks like a child’s. Was this really a dwarf or just a

massively-muscled short man? The thick, black beard could not hide the unmistakable dwarven features and the dark face still held the evil look of the dark north and far removed brethren he had heard of. The large dwarf moved towards Grobar with a large, two-handed hammer of his own. He looked at Grobar and spat at him just before unleashing his own snarled smile.

“We have been looking for you,” said the giant dwarf in a guttural accent. “You should have arrived in Rogrim days ago and we thought you may have gotten side-tracked. So we come looking for you… You have something we want,” growled the dark giant.

Dark dwarf thieves trying to steal the gold he received for this parchment delivery or the was the parchment itself, it made no matter. This fellow did not look like he would let Grobar live if he handed over either, so Grobar growled in his lowest voice the only response he could think of.

“Come and get it...”

The huge dwarf swung the long hammer around his head like a whirling blade. Grobar knew there was no chance of blocking this behemoth hammer from crushing whatever it came into contact with. He leapt to the side as the hammer came crashing down in an effort aimed at demolishing Grobar in one swing. As Grobar rolled back to his feet he thought he would catch the large dwarf pulling his hammer up from the ground and could connect with Bold or Rock before the dark dwarf could regain his weapon proper, but he saw the mammoth ready to swing again.

The swing came around in a large looping swing that Grobar could neither duck to avoid or jump out of the way, so he did what he was taught to do when fighting an opponent with a long weapon; get in closer. So he fell toward the giant. The swing of the hammer still continued, but instead of being hit by the heavy business end, he was knocked away to his right by the huge dwarf’s swinging arms. Grobar hit the dirt and was actually afraid for the first time in his life. He was afraid he would turn over to see this strong warrior poised before him once again.

Grobar did quickly roll over and was only able to halfway sit up

when the dwarven monster was right in front of him with his hammer raised high above his head with both hands. A terrible grin was cracking his black-bearded face. As the hammer stopped its final ascent above his head, ready to start its downward trajectory, the giant's mouth opened and blood spewed forth.

It showered out of his mouth and covered Grobar in a thick, foul smelling shroud that he surely knew meant the end and was some terrible, final insult the giant gave to his enemies before death. Was he to merely be raised again as a dark dwarf or worse, a resident of the dead? With the hammer still raised high above his head, the huge dwarf dropped to his knees with the spray of blood still forcing its way out of his dark face and fell over on top of him – the smaller dark dwarf's disarmed axe buried up to its hilt between the shoulder blades of the beast and Bugger directly behind, panting heavily.

Damon

by Chris Davis

The river was the always the most pungent aspect of the town, the smell always sweet and the flow so crisp one could hear it for miles away. A thing of true beauty, smooth white stones had been laid in to create the river bed and walls. The river was crystal clear and flowed for miles through town both above and below. So elaborate was the lay out of the man made river that it flowed right into the center of town and back out again crisscrossing over itself at least a dozen times in some areas. Everyone in town felt great pride when they saw their river for it was theirs. Such aching beauty was rare and all who lived in the town knew so.

But that was then and this is now. The river is still a thing to behold, and it still runs for miles, its pure white stone blocks creating the effect of a swimming pool that goes on forever. Only now if one was to follow that never ending pool they would find that as they made their way to the center things took an off effect. Closer to the center where the grand fountain once stood the water was red, orangish in hue but red, blood red. At the exact center of the fountain was the source of the blood red color.

It stood no less than 6 feet tall when it stood fully erect. Most of the time it swayed about in a half crouch, for it was more thing than human or even humanoid. Though humanoid would be the term most would use to describe it. Standing at least 6 feet tall, its base was made up of tails of snakes, so many tails just ends every where like a mass of writhing tales. As the eye travels up its form a center body forms just one massive snake lower half leading into a female torso.

Branching out of the torso like any normal female where all the parts of a fully grown woman, only most women do not have dead oval eyes with no iris. Nor do most women have massive translucent wings, sprouting out of the small their back. The few pieces of clothing it wears are modest at best, a armored right arm and gauntleted right hand, plus a tattered cowl over its inhuman head make up the only clothing this thing of nightmares wears. It is here at this point that the cause of the water's color can be seen.

Every inch of this snake like creature is covered in blood. Blood flows down its arms and body, down the massive spear that its right hand holds tightly. The only place free of blood is its red hued translucent wings, which one would swear under closer inspection are made of blood themselves. But that would be madness? Surely such a create can not fly least not with wings made of blood?

Flying or not the damon rest in its nest of snake tails on-top of what once was the town centers fountain. Body heaving arms moving around almost as if to grab the air itself and shake what it needs out of the very ether. All around the shatter fountain base that it uses as a perch for the instance are shattered bones of warriors who tried to best it. A black shield still attached to the frame of a skeleton warrior behind the fountain, asserts to the fate of those that would challenge it. The dead skeleton warrior is bathed in the light of ancient energy.

The damon's right hand glows a odd pale blue near white light. This glow is the ancient energy that it has harnessed. Sparks travel up and down its blood soaked form. It cares not about the blood or the electricity that arcs up and down its armored hand. If anything it seems to welcome the bouts of sting the power the emissions cause. For it to show any form of pain or suffering would be weakness in the eyes of those it would lead. While its rule is firm and absolute this could change at any time for any reason. So the creature suffers in silence knowing that while it is feared and respected it could become game to an number of lesser races.

The Wild Wood

by Donn Turner

Erik was worried. They were deep. Too deep in the wood. He was no fool. One does not spend their entire lifetime in the shadow of the Forest of Galahir without hearing the tales. Ogres. Orcs. Giants. Knights. It made no difference. Whole armies had entered the woods at one time or another, never to be seen or heard from again.

But, the pay was good. Too good. The plan even made sense. A small mercenary band, no more than 20 men, could use the forest as cover. They could get behind Galbirth's forces, and hit him where it hurt. Once they had stormed his estate, they could keep what they wanted. One could retire a wealthy man after such a mission.

But, the danger was great. The forest. Erik cursed himself again. He had let the promise of riches get the better of him. Again. Why? He knew the stories. He knew that it was a fool's errand. The pay. It was just so good. Maybe, too good.

"Brandt…we are too deep…" Erik whispered.

"Quiet" was Brandt's only response.

"…I'm serious…we were not supposed to go this deep…" Erik cautioned.

"I know what I'm doing" Brandt whispered forcefully.

"Brandt! You have to listen to me!" Erik countered.

The veteran mercenary sergeant stopped, and slowly turned to face Erik. "You question me one more time, and I will end you."

"…Sergeant…please…I'm not yeller…but…I know what I'm talking about here…" Erik pleaded.

"Maybe we should listen to what he has to say?" Stone whispered. He was a mountain of a man, but looked tiny compared to the

dense green bushes around him.

"…are you telling me that you are afraid of some trees, Stone?" Brandt mocked.

"It ain't right…and you know it…" Stone countered.

"Yeah…I can feel it too…it's like…we're being watched…" Franko added in. He was another veteran, but looked small and afraid.

"I'm not gonna say this again…you follow my orders…or I drop you where you stand…" Brandt said, threatening the entire group.

Stone stood up from his crouched position in the bushes, and glared at the veteran sergeant. Brandt moved over to glare up at the huge man in reply. The two warriors challenged each other in angered silence.

"That's fine…you two kill each other…but when you're done, we will still be right here…in this cursed forest." Franko mocked.

"You're next…" Brandt replied over his shoulder, but did not turn away from Stone.

"Get it done, or stop acting like orcs, and let's get moving…I ain't growing any younger…" Paps declared in frustration. He was the oldest veteran in the entire mercenary company, and was ready to be done with this last little war.

"Boss…you know I got your back…but this is different…" Stone said, his expression softening a little.

"Erik…you were born in Letharac, weren't you?" Brandt inquired.

"That's what I been trying to tell you…I know the stories of this place…we're too deep…" Erik replied as he looked nervously all around him.

"We all heard the stories, you twit…" Paps stated dismissively.

"Then why are you here?" Erik snapped.

“Because…this is my last fight…and I ain’t gonna let some yeller little twit take away my retirement…I worked too hard to turn back now…” Paps retorted.

Just as Paps finished speaking, the shafts of sunlight that had managed to find their way through the lush green canopy started to fade. One by one, they slowly disappeared, until the mercenaries were left standing in a shadowed glade. The wind had stopped playing with the tops of the trees, and everything seemed to stand still. The silence was almost oppressive.

“…Now…this is something you don’t see every day…” Marko muttered.

“It’s just the damn wind, you twits…” Paps berated.

“…No…they know we’re here…” Erik whispered.

“Who?” Brandt demanded.

“…The trees…” Erik whispered in a tiny voice.

“…Right.” Brandt retorted.

“NO! I’m serious! They know we’re here!” Erik whispered as his fear started to overcome him.

“Get it together, or I will…” Brandt started.

“Or what? HUH? You gonna end me? You gonna kill me? If we don’t leave, and I mean right now, we all gonna be dead!” Erik panicked.

“And go where? Huh? Just where do you think we should go?” Brandt demanded.

“What are you so afraid of?” Stone inquired in his deep voice.

“I seen me an elf in my time…I wasn’t that impressed…” Paps boasted.

“Do tell? You ever seen a Wild One? Huh? They ain’t like other elves, I tell you…” Erik countered.

“I ain’t afraid of no elf.” Stone stated.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you…the Wild Ones ain’t like other elves…they’re not right!” Erik countered.

“You ever seen one?” Paps asked.

“Well…no…no one has…that’s the point!” Erik fumbled.

“This is pointless. We have a job to do. Get it together, and let’s move out.” Brandt declared.

“…no…wait! Listen to me!” Erik pleaded.

Just then, a sound filled the glade. It was as if the forest had taken a deep breath, and then let it out in one long, raspy, exhalation. The mercenaries froze.

“…What…was that?” Marko whispered.

“Oh gods no…it’s too late…it’s too late…” Erik started to panic again.

“Everyone, on me! Form up! If these pointy ears want a fight, then we will…” Brandt started.

One of the other men cried out, and started hacking at a branch that seemed to reach out for his face. The mercenaries, veterans of dozens of battles, started to panic. Several of them started to hack at the trees and bushes that surrounded them. One of the men fired a crossbow bolt into a pile of leaves.

“What in the name of the gods are you doing? Halt! Stop hitting the damn trees!” Brandt raged.

It took some time for the frightened mercenaries to stop lashing out at the forest. After a short time, the men started to lower their

weapons. They all looked at their leader, embarrassed at their actions.

“Well, well, well…look at you…oh, so tough…you sure showed the trees who’s boss…and you, Cole…just what were you shooting at? Huh? You sure killed that pile of dead leaves…” Brandt berated.

The men just stood there. Most of them had lowered their gaze to the forest floor, too ashamed to meet their sergeant’s gaze. For such a bunch of hardened men, they had all acted like frightened children.

“…Right…well, if you lot of killers all are done murdering the trees, let’s get our kit together, and move on.” Brandt chided.

“Where’s Erik” Stone asked.

The mercenaries, confused, started to look around. Erik was nowhere to be seen. In fact, three of the men were gone.

“They were yeller…and they ran…just like a filthy goblin…good riddance…more riches for us. Let’s get it together, and move out. We have a manor to loot.” Brandt concluded.

The mercenaries closed their ranks, and started to move out. They were not the same men that had entered the forest. Before, they were hardened killers, moving at full alert through the woods. They were professionals. Now, they were nothing more than frightened babes, and jumped at every shadow. Most wore terrified looks on their faces. They formed up hesitantly, and started to move deeper into the forest.

“This is no good boss.” Stone whispered after quite some time.

“Don’t start.” Brandt barked.

“We need to stop. Catch our breath. Figure out where we are.” Stone countered.

Brandt was about to respond, but relented. They had been walking for quite some time, and he had no idea where they were. They

could be walking back the way they had come, for all he knew. It was as if the forest was confusing him on purpose.

“Alright…let’s take a break. Everyone, get something to drink, and break out some of the rations.” Brandt ordered, hoping that the pause would fortify the men.

“Where’s Stern?” One of the men asked.

“What? What do you mean? He’s right…” Brandt’s voice trailed off as he realized that yet another one of his men had gone missing.

“He was right behind me! I swear! I heard him walking just a moment ago!” Another one of the men declared.

With this new discovery, the men began to draw their weapons, and started to stand back to back. Brandt was furious. This was supposed to be an easy job.

“You stupid piles of ogre dung! How could you not notice some yeller bellied fool blunder off into the woods?” Brandt demanded.

“It ain’t like that Brandt! He was right behind me! I tell you, I could hear him walking on the dry leaves. He was right there!” One of the men protested.

“They gonna take us one at a time! We’re dead if we keep going!” Another man lamented.

“You shut your trap, you stupid…” Brandt began.

“NO! You shut it Brandt! I ain’t gonna die so that you can get some loot!” Another man protested.

“I’ll crack your…” Brandt began.

“What? Huh? What you gonna do, Brandt? You gonna kill me? This accursed wood is gonna do that anyway! You got nothing to threaten me with, Brandt! I’m out of here! Come on Del!” One of the men countered as he took up his pack, and motioned for his friend to join him. The other mercenary took up his pack, and

started to leave with his friend.

“Fine! Go you sons of orcs! That just leaves more treasure for us!” Brandt roared.

The pair turned their backs on Brandt, and started to make their way back into the woods. Taking this as a sign, more of the men started to do the same. Despite all of Brandt’s threats and insults, the warband was broken. When it was all said and done, only a handful of the original 20 mercenaries remained.

“Now what, Brandt?” Stone asked.

“Well, there are 5 of us left. Galbirth didn’t have that many friends, and more enemies. He took all that he could to face us in the field. That means that he would only have about a dozen left at his manor. Maybe even less. If we’re smart, and quiet, we could take them. That just means that we will have our pick of the spoils.” Brandt thought aloud.

“…You sure about this?” Marko asked.

“…Yeah…” Brandt said after a pause.

The 5 remaining mercenaries formed up, and started the last leg of their journey. If they made it, they would could live the rest of their lives in luxury. But, they had to make it.

After what seemed like hours of hard marching, the forest had grown very dark. It was even colder, as if that was even possible in the midst of summer. Several times, the mercenaries had realized that they were lost, and had to change direction. Now, with the sun going down, they had to stop. It was just too dangerous for them to continue in the darkness.

“Do we start a fire?” Stone asked.

“…Yeah…it will be easier to spot us, but at least we will be able to see them coming…” Brandt reasoned.

“Who?” Stone asked.

"…Them…" Brandt replied, gesturing at the trees.

"Alright. Let's get some wood. At least we can warm up a little." Stone announced to the small group.

The mercenaries fanned out, and started to collect wood for a fire. Just as Brandt had filled up his arms, he heard Marco cry out. Brandt dropped the wood, and drew his sword. If this was it, then at least he would die like a man.

"What is it? Where are they?" Brandt demanded as he reached the other four mercenaries.

"…I…I just…" Marko stammered as he pointed before him.

Brandt looked, and was startled to see a man, obviously tangled in the brush. Brandt cautiously walked over to the still figure, and examined the scene. It was Erik. The poor fool was as tangled as he could be in the brush, with a large limb wrapped around his throat. Erik's neck was an ugly purple and blue.

"You know that he could have done that to himself. If he was spooked, and I mean really spooked, then his thrashing and wrangling could have tangled him up like that. He could have killed himself in his panic." Brandt stated coldly.

"Yeah, I know. And, he was good and spooked the last time that we saw him." Stone replied.

"We're gonna die in here…aren't we?" Marko asked.

Brandt flashed an angry glare at Marko, but then pursed his lips, and turned to look deep into the woods. All of the men seemed to shrink as they gazed out into the darkness. In their despair, none of the veterans noticed that the tree behind them was watching with a cold hatred burning in its eyes.

Deathtime Story

by Gerry Lee

The boy was dying. Consumed and eaten up by the plague, he was little more than a rag doll skeleton to the grim men filling the common grave. It had once been the basement of an old manor house long ago on the outskirts of the little town the boy had lived in... I will not say 'grown up in', as he was very young yet. The manor had burned down years ago, and now the stone lined pit that remained served as a mass grave for the bodies of the plague's victims.

The plague had been killing people for three long weeks in the town. The men that were forced to dispose of the dead no longer had any tears or remorse. Perhaps they had once been good men, men who laughed and loved and cared about their neighbors. Perhaps they had even known the boy. But now they were hard hearted, stony-faced and performed their duties ruthlessly and haphazardly.

It did not matter to the men that the boy lived. He was good as dead, and they had no time to wait around for him to expire. Too many bodies waited their turn for burial. Too many dead. Callously the men tossed the boy and the other corpses they were carrying onto the piles of the dead and headed back the doomed town for more bodies.

Soon the night swallowed up the receding lanterns of the corpse men, and all was dark and silence.

In time the boy's fever broke as it is want to do just before the plague finally kills it's tormented victim. The boy woke, and whimpered softly.

“Mama… mama…” he called in a thin, wavering voice. It was so cold…

The boy was blind, for the plague had eaten out his eyes, but that scarcely mattered in the near perfect dark that shrouded the lands. Only the faintest glitter of a handful of stars shining weakly high

above were any light at all. That, and in the corner, there was the gleam of yellow eyes.

The tall woman sat amongst the corpses, silent and unmoving. Since nightfall she had been patiently waiting for night, invisible to the eyes of the living, taking her leisure and waiting for the witching hour.

Her face was long and lovely, but her hair was wild and swept back in points, and a mask of bone covered the top half of her face. Her lips were turned down in a habitual frown. She was very pale, like the corpses she kept company. Her robes were tanned skins of the ghastliest kind and her breastplate armor human bone.

One might have mistaken her for a corpse herself if not for her bizarre garments and her ancient gleaming yellow eyes.

“...mama …mama?” the boy whimpered plaintively, writhing weakly but unable to rise or even sit up.

The night wind swept through the ruined cellar, and time passed in agony. Eventually, the boy’s calls turned to feeble whimpering and then soft choking sobbing.

Did those wicked old eyes soften? Did the hard gleam of malice become gentled to a woman's pity?

They did. Impossibly, they did. The tall woman rose soundlessly and floated to the boy’s side. There she knelt, looking at the ruins of his face. After a long moment, she took the boy into her lap.

“Mama...?” he wept.

“Shhh…” the woman whispered hoarsely, rocking the child gently.

“Mama...!” the weakest ghost of a smile touched his parched and cracking lips.

And so they sat for long hours in the dark of the night, and the boy slept. But in time the fever began it's final assault, and a spasm of pain woke him shrieking.

“Mama!” he sobbed “Mama it hurts...!” he cried out in agony. The woman whispered harsh words that hurt the ear to hear, and the pain began to subside.

It was no healing prayer or priestly magic, but dark necromancy. With dreadful spells she bought his solace by filling him with the numbness and unfeeling like unto the dead. This spell would eventually kill the boy, but that didn't matter. She knew this plague; he would be dead before the curse killed him.

Sighing, almost rapturously at the cessation of the torture, the boy snuggled against the woman and whispered “Sing for me mama...?”

The woman blinked, embarrassed. She could not sing, not well. Years of incanting forbidden spells had harshened her voice most unnaturally. “Hush… I will tell you a story,” she whispered.

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"Long ago there was in a magical kingdom a great King. He loved to make toys to amuse his Queen and Princes and Princesses and all the royal court. Most of all he liked to make dolls. Not just any dolls but magical ones that could walk and talk and sing! Little soldiers, dancing ballerinas, funny dwarves; he made a miniature little toy kingdom!

But even the best of toys wear out and break with too much play and time. The King could have repaired them, but his sons and daughters got bored with their old favorites and always wanted new toys. The princes would make the soldiers fight against each other, and they would break off pieces and bits, and the boys would roar with laughter, and throw the broken parts away. The Princesses would get tired of their dolls that were wearing last year's dresses and fashions and toss them aside when they got worn out and threadbare.

Outside the castle walls, a big pile of broken toys grew and grew as the years went on.

Now, there was another toymaker who lived in the town outside.

She had no children and wished she did very much. One day she was passing by the gates and she saw the pile of worn out dolls. They reminded her of little people, and she felt great pity for them. So she sought an audience with the King and begged the King to restore them.

The King was angry! "What? Make toys that never break or wear out? Fix them up so they last forever? Why they would be like my own sons and daughters then! These are not Princes and Princesses; they are only toys! Begone!'

He threw the woman toymaker out of the palace and told her never to come back.

For a long time, the woman stayed away. But at night, she would dream of the broken toys and weep and cry. At last she crept back to the garbage heap and tried to fix the dolls.

She was very skilled but not like the great King. She couldn't make them talk and sing, but they could walk a little. She painted the worn out faces and glued pieces back on, but they were never quite the same. Sad, she started to cry. But then an idea came to her.

'I will march these broken dolls past the Kings window everyday! Then he will remember he once loved them, take pity and fix them up again!' she cried gaily."

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The ruined boy giggled weakly in the woman's lap. "Like a parade?"

The woman smiled to see him forget his suffering for a moment. "Yes. Yes, it was a parade of broken dolls..."

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"The King's sons and daughters gathered on the balcony the next day to see a strange sight. Their old toys marching in the garden! But where the woman toymaker had been moved to pity by the broken toys, the Royal children were outraged. Some were missing limbs and parts or had their paint missing or patches of missing

hair. Instead of gracefully marching, the dolls could only shuffle and hop.

'How ugly! They are grotesque!' they cried. 'We wish they would stay broken!"

The Princes sent their new soldiers, gleaming knights and warriors and toy cannons, into the yard to destroy the parade of toys. The old toys were destroyed, and some of the new ones too. But the Princes did not care. They had more; their father would make as many as they wanted! The more they hated the broken dolls, the more they enjoyed seeing them destroyed!

Even so, the woman toymaker did not give up. As the pile of broken toys grew daily, she worked harder and faster to fix them. The Parade went on and on, and so did the toy wars.

And all the while the King watched from his window…"

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"...and what did the King do?" the boy asked breathlessly. Then quietly, gently, he died in her lap.

The woman tenderly stroked the boy's face, eyes glittering with tears.

"...I don't know child. The wars go on and on..."

The hour was very late. It was almost daybreak then. The tall woman rose to her feet.

And the dead rose with her.